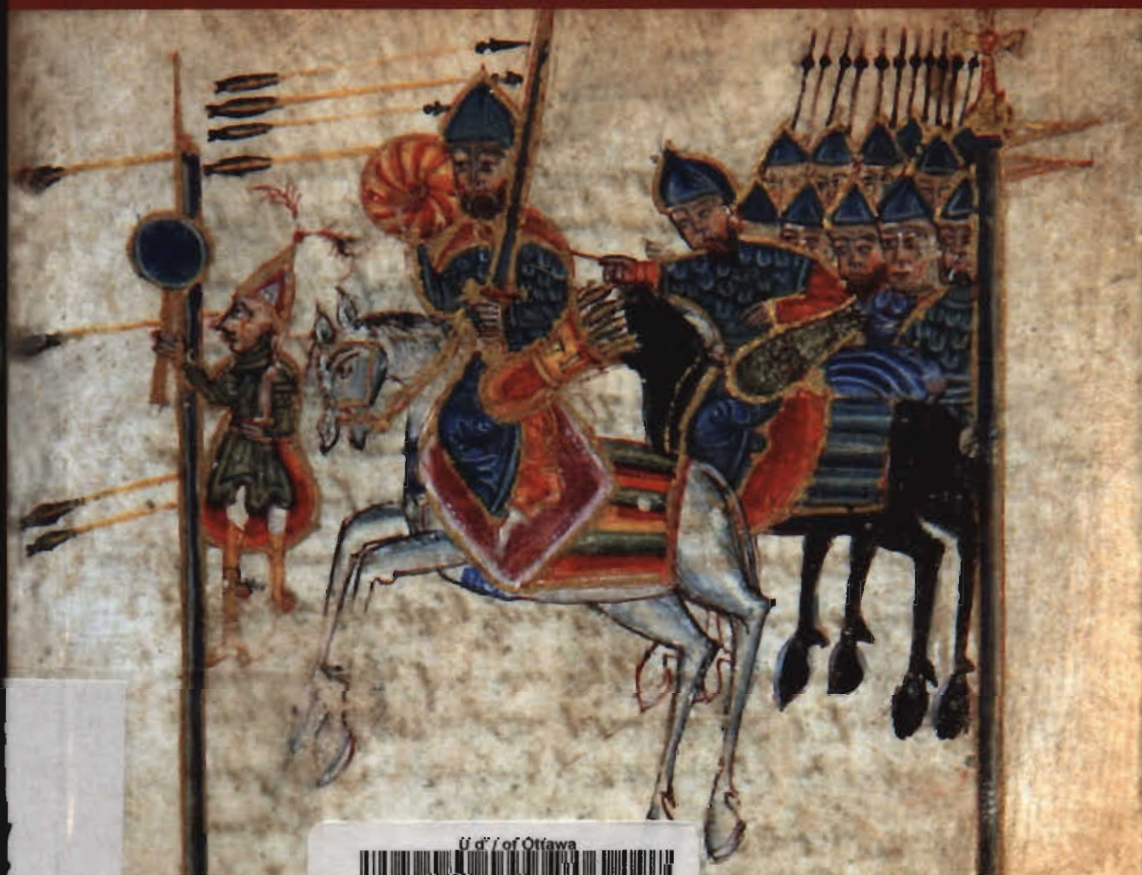


THE
ARMENIAN MILITARY
IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

CONFLICT AND ALLIANCE
UNDER JUSTINIAN AND MAURICE



U of Ottawa



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ARMEN AYVAZIAN

Foreword by Ilkka Syvanne

THE ARMENIAN MILITARY
IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

*Conflict and Alliance
under Justinian and Maurice*

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Armen Ayvazyan

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Armen Ayvazyan

Foreword

When I was asked to write a foreword for this book, I was very pleased to comply because there is a definite need for the kind of study Dr. Armen Ayvazyan has written. In the course of my research of late Roman military history, I have become ever more aware of how little research has been done on the neighbors, allies, friends, and enemies of Rome. In fact, I have been forced to devote more time to researching those than to researching Roman military. For example, I have so far been unable to find any really good military map of Rome's eastern frontier. The main passes and roads, especially the Roman roads, are well known and shown at least on some of the better maps, but not the less important pathways that could still have been (and were) used even by cavalry armies. Similarly, it is a rare treat, if the map includes all the forts and fortresses that had military significance. Therefore, the Map attached to the present study is a welcome new addition to the military cartography of the Roman/Byzantine North-Eastern frontier.

Dr. Armen Ayvazyan's book consists of two separate essays that deal with different and largely overlooked aspects of Roman and Armenian military history, but which are still thematically interconnected. The topics of the essays are the Armenian revolt of 538-539 and the reasons for the omission of the Armenians from Emperor Maurice's *Strategikon*, one of the most famous Byzantine manuals of war. Ayvazyan uses these essays as his vehicles to highlight other equally or even more important matters relating to the military cultures of both Rome and Armenia from the fourth to the sixth centuries. With these two

pieces of solid research, Ayvazyan has positively managed to bring to the limelight matters of highest importance.

On the surface, it seems surprising that until now the militarily very significant Armenian rebellion of 538-539 against Justinian's government had not been studied in any satisfactory manner. One of the possible reasons for this is that there have been too few historians with the right qualifications. To put it simply, there have been too few historians who also understand military matters. Fortunately, in the past 30 years the situation has been slowly improving and Dr. Ayvazyan is a prime example of this long-awaited transformation. He clearly possesses an in-depth knowledge of both the Armenian and Western primary sources and secondary literature together with an expertise of both ancient and modern military theories and affairs.

In the first essay Dr. Ayvazyan has managed to perform an almost impossible task. He has demonstrated that, despite the perceived paucity of the relevant historical evidence, it is still possible to arrive at a completely new, well-substantiated and plausible reconstruction of the Armenian rebellion in 538-539. He has done that by applying an interdisciplinary approach, which includes the simultaneous utilization of historical geography, geopolitics, linguistics, historical-comparative methodology in combination with the analyses of military strategy and tactics. Ayvazyan's ability to make sense of the dynamics of a battle even when the sources are sparse is best testified by his multi-pronged analysis of the battle of Oinochalakon (Avnik). He accurately locates the battlefield, deciphers the offensive and defensive movements of the campaign, determines the chain of command and composition of the Armenian rebel forces, and discovers the preferred Armenian tactics against numerically superior enemies from the fifth to the sixth centuries. Only after having built these mutually supportive facts does Ayvazyan proceed to present his strikingly convincing reconstruction of the battle itself.

The second essay expounds a persuasive set of reasons about why the Armenians were omitted from the list of enemies in the *Strategikon*. While doing this, it also unearths some deep-rooted cultural prejudices within the Roman Empire. On the basis of these findings, it is also easy to see why the Arabs were similarly left out of the same list. The original questions put forward here allow the author to reveal explicitly the continuity of – and interplay between – Roman and Byzantine traditional policies against Armenia's independent or autonomous status on the one hand and ethnic bias against the Armenians in Roman and Byzantine society on the other hand. Ayvazyan illustrates how important a role the Armenians played in the Roman military and how varied, and sometimes hostile, the Roman elites' reactions were towards them. After reading Ayvazyan's analysis, it becomes abundantly clear that the root source of the military effectiveness of the Armenian princes and their retinues was their fiercely independent nature. This in turn could cause the Roman government to adopt hostile and counterproductive measures to quell their traditionally self-reliant spirit, as exemplified in Maurice's ill-conceived project of transferring the Armenian military from Armenia to the Balkans.

In short, Dr. Armen Ayvazyan's small, yet dense study of Byzantine, Armenian and Iranian military relations is a pioneering piece of scholarship, indeed capable of triggering a renewed interest by Western military historians into the too-often ignored Armenian material. Not coincidentally, this is one of the author's stated objectives in his Preface, which represents, in effect, a well-developed investigative draft plan for future students of Armenian military history.

Ilkka Syvanne, Ph.D.

Vice Chairman of the Finnish Society for Byzantine Studies,
author of *The Age of Hippotaxotai. Art of War
in Roman Revival and Disaster 491-636*

Preface

Ancient and medieval primary sources have amply recorded the robust and durable presence of the Armenian armed forces as well as their recurrently effective combat performance both within their homeland and abroad. Nevertheless, the military history of Armenia still remains a largely uncharted terrain: the system of manning its troops, their numbers, force structure, training, equipment, ideology and art of war have not been well analyzed. Likewise, Armenia's system of fortifications and the use of its roads for military purposes have yet to be explored in depth.

The Armenian military had been both the progenitor and the product of the Kingdom of Armenia and its antecedent states, which originated on the Armenian Highlands in times immemorial and had a historically recorded existence at least from the second millennium BC. It is true that due to its extremely difficult geostrategic location, particularly its immediate adjacency with the greatest empires of ancient and medieval world, as well as the early emergence of feudalism, Armenia was periodically subjected to decentralizing tendencies. However, the well-organized centralization of Armenian kingdoms was much more regular than has been generally recognized.

From the ancient period till the mid-eleventh century AD Armenia had one of the most experienced, capable, and institutionalized armed forces in the Near East. Not surprisingly, among various national institutions operative in ancient and medieval Armenian kingdoms the most ethno-nationally integrative function was performed by the

military. The importance of the military among other state structures was reflected, for example, in that Armenian *sparapets* (commanders-in-chief) were unmatched in their next-after-the-king position in the feudal hierarchies of Great Armenia. This was the procedure under at least the dynasties of Arshakunis (66-428 AD) and Bagratunis (885-1045 AD), possibly of earlier Artashesians (189 BC-11 AD) too, as well as in the later Cilician Armenian Kingdom (1198-1375 AD). Conspicuously, even after the Persians abolished the Armenian kingdom of Arshakunis in 428 AD, they did not encroach upon *sparapetutiun*, the *war ministry* of Great Armenia, with a unified command structure headed by the princely house of Mamikoneans, the hereditary *sparapets*. As will be discussed later in this study, from 390 AD up until the reforms of Emperor Justinian in the 530s, the Romans, too, tolerated the functioning of the *sparapets* in the regions of Armenia under their control. The office of *sparapet* continued operating during the Arab domination as well, from the seventh to the ninth centuries.

The Armenian armed forces maintained their combat readiness throughout the lengthy intervals of temporary absence of an independent state. During Persian, Romano-Byzantine and Arab dominations, the high combat effectiveness of the Armenian forces was displayed in many successful operations executed either independently or in conjunction with both Romano-Byzantine and Partho-Persian armies.

The distinctiveness of the ancient and medieval Armenian armed forces and their ways of war from those of their rivals was shaped by a number of historical, geographical and societal factors, of which I will enumerate only the major ones:

(1) *the defense of the terrain of Armenia*, essentially mountainous but with various open passageways leading to the heart of the country, necessitated the creation and skillful employment of a combined force of heavy and light cavalry alongside the specialized

infantry units, including garrison and mountain troops;

(2) *the natural features of Armenia*, especially its excellent horse pastures, made it one of the earliest places of horse breeding: Armenia was producing abundant numbers of war horses¹ and thus enabling the maintenance of a highly mobile cavalry-centric army;

(3) *Armenia's economy and population base* were large enough to sustain armies of professional commanders and practiced soldiers;

(4) *Armenia's climate* of hot summers and bitterly cold winters required all-weather preparedness, special equipment and clothing for the troops, adding to their confidence, physical toughness and endurance;

(5) *almost incessant wars* waged against the armies of such superpowers as Parthia/Persia and Rome/Byzantium (more often than not in alliance with one of them against the other) as well as against the Caucasian mountaineers and the invading nomads from Central Asia acquainted the Armenian military with the most potent war machines of the time and, by necessity, helped to develop strategies for opposing each of them and adopting their foes' warfare practices, thus enriching the resourcefulness of Armenian battlefield tactics;

(6) *the interplay between an early and strong sense of Armenian ethnocentric identity, the distinctive national culture and Church as well as the continual armed opposition against foreign imperial powers* were all in fact emotionally powerful vehicles for developing nationally unifying – though not always and automatically applied – social-psychological attachments and ideological commitments to the traditions of independent or autonomous existence;

(7) finally and most importantly, the ancient and medieval *Armenian states and kings were naturally cultivating and institu-*

¹ For the details, see Есаян, С. А. *Оружие и военное дело древней Армении*. Ереван, 1966, с. 119-130 (this is one of the few professional studies on weapons and warfare of ancient Armenia).

tionalizing their armed forces, all in all effectuating a considerable standardization of Armenia's military culture.²

The title of this book should in no way be taken as an application for a comprehensive coverage of the numerous and diverse relationships between the Armenian military and the Byzantine Empire in the age of Emperors Justinian and Maurice. The present study strives to bring to light only one of the least known, yet most turbulent periods in the history of the Armenian military.

In its first part, I embark on a military-historical analysis of the Armenian uprising against Emperor Justinian's government in 538-539. While revealing and evaluating various tactical elements and stratagems employed by the Armenian forces, it was imperative to selectively consider earlier and later evidence regarding their military operations, including both conventional warfare and high risk missions such as targeting killings of enemy commanders-in-chief and assassination plots against the heads of colonial administrations. Thus it became possible to identify some important aspects of military strategy and tactics utilized by the Armenian commanders from the fourth to the sixth centuries.

And in the second part, I examine the Byzantine attitudes towards the Armenians and their armed forces, revealing, inter alia, that the underlying source for continuity of the anti-Armenian images with the analogous Roman tradition of prejudice was essentially geopolitical.

It is my hope that this book will act as a catalyst for a long overdue rigorous scholarly research into the military history of Armenia. After all, the booming studies of the Romano-Byzantine and Partho-Persian militaries could hardly claim to be inclusive without a closer analysis of the enduringly dynamic armed forces of Armenia, may the latter

² See Արմեն Այվազյան, *Հայ զինվորականության պատմիկ վարքականոցը (4-5-րդ դդ.)* [hereafter – Ayyazyan, Armen. *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, the 4-5th centuries*]. Yerevan, 2000.

be an intermittently fully independent or autonomous actor in the historical Near East.

A. A.
Yerevan, Armenia
January 2012



A Note on Armenian Personal Names and Toponyms

The Armenian personal names and toponyms appearing in this study are used interchangeably in either their original Armenian, or Greek, Latinized and Anglicized versions, depending on the quoted source as well as whether the particular usage has been historically established in the scholarly literature. Below is the list of Armenian names and toponyms in both variants, while the transliterations are provided in square brackets.

Personal names

Ակակ [Akak] = Acacius
 Արշակ [Arshak] = Arsaces
 Արշակունի [Arshakuni] = Arsacid/Arsacids
 Արտաշեսյաններ [Artashesians] = Artaxiads
 Արտաշիր [Artashir] = Artasires
 Արտավան [Artavan] = Artabanes
 Ասպետունի [Aspetuni] = Aspetean/Aspetian/Aspetiani/
 Apetiani
 Ատրվշնասպ [Ատրվշնասպ] = Atrvshnasp
 Բագրատունի [Bagratuni] = Bagratids
 Ղազար Փարպեցի [Ghazar Parpetzi] = Lazar of Parpi
 Գրիգոր [Grigor] = Gregorius/Gregory
 Հրահատ (Կամսարական) [Hrahat (Kamsarakan)] = Aratius

Համազասպ [Hamazasp] = Amazaspes
 Հովհաննես [Hovhannes] = John
 Մամիկոնեան [Mamikonean/Mamikonian] = Mamikonids
 Ներսեհ (Կամսարական) [Nerseh (Kamsarakan)] = Narses
 Վասակ [Vasak] = Bassaces
 Եղիշե [Yeghishe] = Elishe, Eliseus

Toponyms

Վահանաշեն = Vahanashen
 Արտալես [Artales] = Artaleson
 Անիկ [Avnik] = Oenochalakon/Oinochalakon
 Բայբերդ, Բաբերդ [Ba[y]berd] = Ba[y]berd
 Բողբերդ [Բողբերդ] = Bolberd
 Դարոյնք [Daroink] = Daroink
 Բասեան [Basean] = Basean
 Եկեղեաց [Ekeghyats] = Ekelesene/Akilisene
 Կարին [Karin] = Carenitis = Theodosiopolis
 Կիթարիճ [Kitarich] = Kitharizon/Citharizon
 Մարտիրոսուպոլիս [Martyrusopolis] = Martyropolis
 Մլեհի [Mlehi] = Mlehi
 Սպեր [Sper] = Syspirititis/Suspirititis
 Օրոն [Oron] = Horonon
 Սատաղ [Satagh] = Satala
 Ծանգակ [Tzanzak] = Tzanzakon
 Վխիկ [Vkhik] = Vkhik
 Ոքաղե [Vokaghe] = Okale

Preliminary Notes

PART I.

The Armenian rebellion against the Byzantine Empire in 538-539 AD is a significant event in the history of the region. It was a military conflict that resulted in the death of Emperor Justinian I and the establishment of a new dynasty in the East. The rebellion was led by the Armenian general Vahan and was supported by the Sassanid Empire. The Byzantine Empire was weakened by a series of wars and internal strife, and the Armenian rebellion was a direct result of this weakness. The rebellion was a major victory for the Armenians and a major defeat for the Byzantine Empire. It marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the region.

**The Armenian Rebellion
against the Byzantine Empire in 538-539 AD:
A Historical-Military Analysis**

The Armenian rebellion against the Byzantine Empire in 538-539 AD is a complex event that has been the subject of much historical and military analysis. This analysis will examine the political, military, and social factors that led to the rebellion, the course of the conflict, and its long-term consequences. The rebellion was a major victory for the Armenians and a major defeat for the Byzantine Empire. It marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the region. The rebellion was a direct result of the weakness of the Byzantine Empire, which was weakened by a series of wars and internal strife. The Armenian rebellion was a major military conflict that resulted in the death of Emperor Justinian I and the establishment of a new dynasty in the East. The rebellion was led by the Armenian general Vahan and was supported by the Sassanid Empire. The Byzantine Empire was weakened by a series of wars and internal strife, and the Armenian rebellion was a direct result of this weakness. The rebellion was a major victory for the Armenians and a major defeat for the Byzantine Empire. It marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the region.

Preliminary Notes

The independent kingdom of Great Armenia was divided between Sassanid Persia and the Roman Empire in 387. In 390, the Romans abolished the western Armenian kingdom on their territory and in 428 the Persians did the same with the much larger eastern Armenian kingdom.³ During the fifth and sixth centuries, however, the Armenians repeatedly revolted against both these ancient and early medieval superpowers (note that the Roman Empire was supplanted by the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire in 395).

This study intends to reconstruct the military history of the most powerful Armenian rebellion against Byzantium that took place in 538-539. A sole and rather detailed account of it was provided by the famous historian Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 – c. 565), the adviser and confidant of Belisarius, one of the greatest generals in the service of Byzantine Empire. The evidence provided by Procopius is all the more valuable because it had been derived immediately from the imperial army's highest command circles.⁴ Although this evidence was addressed by several historians (M. Chamchian, J. Bury, N. Adontz,

³ On the dates of partition of Armenia and the abolishment of the two concurrent Armenian kingdoms that emerged respectively in Roman and Persian parts, see Toumanoff, Cyril. *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963), pp. 151-152, 192-195.

⁴ Procopius served on Belisarius's staff between 527 and c. 540 and accompanied his general to Persia, Africa and Italy (Elton, Hugh. "Army and Battle in the Age of Justinian," in Erdkamp, Paul, ed., *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), p. 533.

C. Tumanoff, V. Iskanyan), who accordingly have made a number of important points and clarifications, it has not been subjected to a specific historical-military analysis until now. One of the consequences of such investigative gap was that contemporary Armenian historiography, by and large, has ignored the central martial event of the rebellion – the pitched battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies. This battle has been at times completely forgotten and, at others, barely mentioned or described very vaguely in terms of the character of that military engagement.⁵ Paradoxically, the whole rebellion itself has been on occasion absent from the sight of Armenian historians.⁶

5 Չամչյանց, Մ. Պատմութիւն Հայոց [hereafter – Chamchian, M. *History of Armenia*], v. II, Venice, 1785, pp. 241-243 (here the rebellion is incorrectly dated to 536-537); Bury, J. B. *A History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.)*, Vol. 1, London-New York: Macmillan, 1889, p. 420; Ադոնց, Ն. Պատմական ուսումնասիրություններ [hereafter – Adontz, *Historical Studies*], Paris, 1948, pp. 299-303; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196; Հակոբյան, Թ. Ազատագրական շարժումները Հայաստանում V-IX դդ. [Hakobyan, T. “The liberation movements in Armenia in V-IX centuries”], *Բանբեր Երևանի համալսարանի*, 1972, No. 1, p. 129 (in this article the rebellion is crudely dated to “the middle of the 5th century”). Relatively detailed overview and synthesis of what has been said about this rebellion by previous Armenian researchers is provided by V. Iskanyan in his last work, where, however, following Chamchian, it is again incorrectly dated to 536-537 (see Իսկանյան, Վ. Կ. Հայ-բյուզանդական հարաբերությունները IV-VII դդ. [hereafter – Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*], Yerevan, 1991, pp. 210-221). Although this anti-Byzantine rebellion, dated 539 BC, is represented on a couple of recently published historical maps, except for the presumed area of its spreading, they mark neither the decisive battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies, nor, indeed, any other events (см.: Բ. Հ. Հարությունյան, *Հայաստանի պատմության ատլաս*, Ա մաս [Harutyunyan, B. *The Atlas of the History of Armenia*, Part I, Yerevan, 2004], pp. 52-53; Թ. Հարությունյան (պատ. խմբ.), *Հայաստանի ազգային ատլաս*, [Harutyunyan, B. (ed.), *The National Atlas of Armenia*, Yerevan, 2008], p. 35).

6 The following books, in particular, have completely overlooked the rebellion of 538-539: Է. Լ. Դանիելյան, *Հայաստանի քաղաքական պատմությունը և հայ առաքելական եկեղեցին (VI-VII դարեր)* [hereafter – Danielyan, E. L. *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII centuries)*], Yerevan, 2000; Hovannisian, Richard G. ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. Vol. I. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 106-107; Bournoutian, George A. *A Concise History of the Armenian People: From Ancient Times to the Present* (Costa Mesa, CA.: 2002), pp. 64-65; Hewsen, Robert H. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* (University of Chicago Press,

Meanwhile, the battle in question, given its decisive nature, generated interest among some Western historians (B. Rubin, I. Syvanne, J. Martindale, C. Whately).⁷ Their short remarks, however, in no way amount to – or claim to provide – a systematic analysis of either this battle or, moreover, the 538-539 Armenian rebellion at large.

2001), pp. 84-86.

7 See Rubin, Berthold. “Prokopios von Kaisareia,” in *RE (Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft)*, vol. 23.1, Stuttgart, 1957, pp. 381-382; Syvanne (Syvänne), Ilkka. *The Age of Hippotaxotai. Art of War in Roman Revival and Disaster 491-636*. PhD Dissertation in History, the University of Tampere (Finland), 2004, pp. 440-441; Whately, Conor Campbell. *Descriptions of Battle in the ‘Wars’ of Procopius*. PhD Dissertation in Classics and Ancient History, the University of Warwick, 2009, pp. 155-157, 167-168, 188-189, 195, 199, the battle in question is specifically identified as a pitched one on pp. 155 (note 28) and 199. Martindale, J. R. *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume III. AD 527–641* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), p. 1162.

1.

The start of the rebellion**Assassination operations by Artabanes Arshakuni**

Before we consider the course of the rebellion, emphasis should be placed on its initial act of decapitating the imperial administration in Byzantine *Inner Armenia* (also known as Armenia Interior/Upper Armenia, annexed to Empire first as the kingdom of Great Armenia)⁸ through the assassination of its head, Acacius, incidentally an Armenian by birth.⁹ According to Procopius, Acacius, “being base by nature, gained the opportunity of displaying his inward character, and he proved to be the most cruel of all men toward his subjects. For he plundered their property without excuse and ordained that they should pay an unheard-of tax of four *centenaria*. But the Armenians, unable to bear him any longer, conspired together and slew Acacius and fled for refuge to Pharangium.”¹⁰ This

⁸ On Inner/Interior Armenia, see Adontz, Nicholas. *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions based on the NAXARAR System*. Translated with partial revisions, a bibliographical note and appendices by Nina G. Garsoian. (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970), pp. 39-53; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 594. Justinian calls it in his decree “Great(er) Armenia, which is called Interior” (Greatrex, Geoffrey & Lieu, Samuel N. C. (eds.), *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630: A narrative Sourcebook*. Edited and compiled. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 83).

⁹ Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ Proc. Bell. Pers. (Procopius of Caesaria, *History of the Wars: The Persian War*. Vol. I, Books 1-2 Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition), 1914, II.3.6-7.

successful assassination operation deserves special consideration. The elimination of Acacius, which took place most probably in 538,¹¹ was certainly not an easy task. After introducing a draconian tax regime, openly plundering the population, and, earlier, “treacherously” slaying, “by the emperor’s will,” Amazaspes (Arm. *Hamazasp*), the former ruler of Byzantine Armenia, Acacius and his bodyguards must have been extremely suspicious and cautious, expecting all sorts of surprises from the local Armenian princes (*nakharars*), who were in command of experienced private armies and had centuries-old traditions of national resistance. The plot was planned and carried out by a scion of the former Armenian royal dynasty - Artabanes Arsacid (*in Arm.* – Artavan Arshakuni), who later became famous in the Byzantine Empire for his outstanding exploits in Africa. The details of this operation remain unknown. Nevertheless, an indirect concept about it or at least of Artabanes’s dexterity and audacity in conducting special operations can be constructed by analyzing his minute planning and successful implementation of another plot – the assassination of Gontharis, the tyrant of Libya (Byzantine North Africa), in Carthage in May 546. In preparing a military coup in Carthage, Artabanes must have taken into account and used the know-how of the operation against Acacius, carried out eight years earlier in Armenia. Hence, for the examiner of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539 it is of definite interest to scrutinize the plot against Gontharis, described by Procopius of Caesarea in great detail.¹² Without reproducing here a lengthy account of the primary source on this special operation (see below, Appendix A), its

¹¹ The anti-Byzantine rebellion of the Armenians ended in late autumn of 539 with the retreat of the rebels to Persia, but the events that took place in the course of it, clearly suggest a longer period than that one year, so dating it within 538-539 years seems to be most trustworthy. The same dating, without explanation, is given by Toumanoff, see his *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196.

¹² Proc. Bell. Vand. (Procopius of Caesaria: *History of the Wars*, Vol. 2, Books 3-4: *Vandalic War*. Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition), 1916, II.27-28.

main elements are identified below as follows: Artabanes managed –

(1) to keep his plan in absolute secrecy for a long time (confiding only with his two closest Armenian friends: even his unit of hand-picked and completely loyal Armenian veteran soldiers was not aware of scheduled assassination attempt until the very last moment);

(2) to lull Gontharis and his armed security guards into a false sense of security;

(3) to covertly smuggle arms into a strictly protected area for the feast, where Gontharis was carousing;

(4) in tactical terms, to correctly position each of the few participants in the operation;

(5) to give them clear and unambiguous orders, properly assessing their combat capabilities;

(6) to effectively enforce the plan elaborated beforehand, improvising and responding instantly to changing circumstances;

(7) to secure allies;

(8) to seize power in the city and then across North Africa into his own hands;

(9) to accomplish all this with no – or perhaps minimal – losses to his Armenian squad.¹³

13 For Procopius's account of this assassination operation, see Appendix A. The praetorian prefect Athanasius could not have been the real mastermind of this plot, as claimed by Flavius Cresconius Corippus, a sixth-century Roman poet (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 143-144), for the simple reason that the assassination was carried out by the Armenian squad, which had been instructed by and obeyed the orders of their commander Artabanes only. Moreover, the communication between the conspirators during the assassination – and undoubtedly also planning stage – was in Armenian (Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, II.28.16; cf. Charanis, Peter, "Ethnic Changes in the Byzantine Empire in the Seventh Century," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 13 (1959), p. 31, n. 47). This was, first and foremost, a military mission and Athanasius was not a military man. The fact that Artabanes was recognized by the Emperor Justinian and all the contemporaries as *the* man who liberated Africa strongly supports Procopius's version of events. Athanasius, however, was most probably involved in the preparation of the coup, as could be judged from his close collaboration with Artabanes immediately after the assassination of Gontharis.

In short, from a military perspective, the efficiency and effectiveness of Artabanes and his unit's actions are worthy of the highest professional appraisal.

We also know the names of Artabanes's two confidants who played a crucial role in carrying out his assignment – Gregorius (Arm. *Grigor*)¹⁴ and his bodyguard (*Doryphoros*)¹⁵ Artasires (Artashir), also an Arshakuni offspring. For this and other exploits in Libya, the Emperor Justinian bestowed upon Artabanes Arshakuni the title of commander-in-chief of imperial armies in Africa – *magister militum Africae*.¹⁶ After his arrival from Africa to Constantinople, Artabanes is described by Procopius in most flattering terms:

*Now when Artabanes reached Byzantium, the common people admired him for his achievements and loved him for his other qualities. For he was both tall of stature and handsome, of a noble character and little given to speech. And the emperor had honoured him in a very unusual manner. For he had appointed him general of the troops in Byzantium and commander of the foederati, as well as clothing him with the dignity of consul.*¹⁷

14 Adontz considers Gregorius to be Artabanes's cousin, son of his paternal sister and Vasak Mamikonyan (see Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 305), while Toumanoff does not rule out the possibility that he could have been Artabanes's nephew, son of his brother Vahan (see Toumanoff, C., "The Heraclids and the Arsacids," *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, No. 19 (1985), pp. 432-433).

15 Hans Delbrück notes that the *doryphoros*, who formed at the time "strictly private entourage of the [Byzantine] military commander... could be called, simultaneously, the staff, adjutants, orderlies and bodyguards." (quoted from the Russian translation of his *History of warfare in the framework of political history*: Дельбрюк, Ганс. *Всеобщая история военного искусства в рамках политической истории*. Москва, ЭКСМО, 2008, с. 356).

16 During his military career in the Byzantine Empire, Artabanes was in turn granted the offices of *magister militum Africae* in 546, *ex-consul and magister militum praesentalis* in 546/547, *magister militum per Thraciam* in 550, commander-in-chief in Sicily in 551 (see, in particular, Toumanoff, "The Heraclids and the Arsacids," p. 433). As justly observed by N. Adontz, "the life of Prince Artabanes reads like a novel" (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 318).

17 Proc., *Bell. Goth.* (Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, Vol. IV, Books 6-7:

Despite these honors, Artabanes subsequently participated in the planning of the third, and failed, assassination attempt – this time against the Emperor Justinian himself. Although Procopius ascribes to Artabanes and Arsaces (Arshak) – another Armenian nobleman and inspirer of a failed enterprise (“an Armenian by birth and one of the Arsacidae, related to Artabanes by blood”) – mainly personal reasons for dissatisfaction with Justinian, an intensified Byzantine oppression of Armenia, in particular, the destruction of deep-rooted institutions of national self-rule should be considered as no less, if not more crucial motivation for these two Arshakuni conspirators. This is more than eloquently revealed in the following reproachful words addressed by Arsaces to Artabanes:

at the present juncture, he said, he was utterly cowed, and he continued to sit there without a spark of manhood, though his fatherland was kept under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes, his father had been slain on the pretext of a treaty and covenant, and his whole nation¹⁸ had been enslaved and was kept scattered to every corner of the Roman empire. But in spite of these facts Artabanes thought it sufficient for him to be a general of the Romans and merely bear the name of consul.¹⁹

The Gothic War. Transl. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, English and Greek Edition, 1924), III.31.

18 This passage was translated by Dewing as “his whole family,” while N. Adontz and H. Bartikyan chose “his whole nation/people,” which is much more fitting to the historical context); see Адонц, Н. *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана: Политическое состояние на основе нахарарского строя*, СПб., 1908, с. 206; Բյուզանդական աղբյուրներ Հ. Ա. Պրոկոպիոս Կեսարացի: Թարգմ. բնագրից, առաջարան և ծան. Հրաշ Բարթիկյանի [hereafter – *Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I. Procopius of Caesarea. The preface, transl. from the original and commentary by H. M. Bartikyan], Yerevan, 1967, p. 235.

19 Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, III.32.6-7.

2.

The eve of the decisive battle and the geopolitical situation

Restarting the direct analysis of Armenian rebellion of 538-539, one important allusion by Procopius – that after murdering Acacius, the Armenians “fled for refuge to Pharangium” – needs to be explained first. By Pharangium (Pharangion) the Greek sources identified the gold-mines (known in Armenian as “Posadurn”) in the canton (in Arm. *gavar*) Sper (Syspirtitis) of Upper Armenia, right on the border with Tayk. Both provinces of Upper Armenia and Tayk were previously part of the former kingdom of Great Armenia. Tayk was located in the Persian part of Armenia, which was called *Persarmenia* by the Byzantines.

The canton of Sper was famous from the ancient times; it had paid tribute to the royal treasury for centuries.²⁰ Pharangium was convincingly localized by Adontz, who, inter alia, relates the Byzantine chronicler John Malalas’s (c. 491-578) testimony that

“the mountains lying on the border were very rich in gold; in periods of heavy rainfall, the earth washed down from the mountains and uncovered the gold deposits. These lands had formerly been rented out by the Romans and Persians for 200 pounds of gold, but with the

20 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 22-23; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, pp. 206-222, 299.

*transfer of these lands to the Empire under Anastasius, the Romans alone received this revenue.*²¹

The retreat of the Armenians to Pharangium was a sound logistical decision, since its gold-mines represented a strong material and financial base for the uprising. No less important were, of course, purely military considerations, including the impregnability of the area and its location right along the state border line, which made it possible to establish reliable communication with both the related houses of the Armenian princes in Persarmenia and the Persian king, as well as to retreat, if necessary, into the confines of the Persian empire.

From what Procopius tells next, it becomes clear that all three major Armenian princely houses, the Arshakunis,²² the Mamikoneans and the Bagratunis (Aspetuni or Aspetians)²³ – or, more correctly, those of their branches, which were living in and ruled over a significant portion of Byzantine Armenia – took part in the rebellion. The city of Karin (Carenitis, Theodosiopolis) “undoubtedly numbered among the ancestral provinces of the Arsacid princes;”²⁴ the canton of Sper belonged to the Bagratuni from time immemorial;²⁵ and the

21 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 429 (n. 58).

22 This branch of Arshakunis derived most probably from the last Armenian king in the Byzantine part of Armenia – Arshak III (AD 387-390): see Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 192-193.

23 On the sameness of Aspetuni and Bagratuni, see Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 194 (n. 209), 202, 324-325. Toumanoff notes that “the form *Aspetuni* or, possibly, *Aspetean* is not found in any Armenian sources, though it must have existed” (*ibid.*, p. 324, n. 83).

24 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 100. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 193-194 (n. 209). The especially active participation in this rebellion of Arshakuni princes, John and his sons – Artabanes and John, could be partially explained by their aspiration to restore their control over Karin.

25 The possession of Sper by the Bagratunis is mentioned by Movses Khorenatzi (Մովսէս Խորենացի, *Պատմութիւն Հայոց* [hereafter - Movses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*. The critical text prepared by M. Abeghyan and S. Harutyunyan. Tiflis, 1913], II.37, 63; III.43), Pavstos Buzand (Փավստոս Բուզանդ, *Հայոց պատմութիւն: Փարգևա-*

canton of Ekeghyats (Ekelesene or Akilisene) was inherited by the Mamikoneans in 439, after the death of Sahak the Great, Catholicos of Armenia.²⁶ Perhaps these three clans owned some other territories in Inner Armenia as well. Likewise, it cannot be excluded that they were joined by some less powerful Armenian princes, whose names, unfortunately, were not preserved in primary sources.²⁷

The armed forces under the command of these princely houses managed to unite into one single Armenian army and concentrate on the difficult terrain in Sper. As it would be shown later, they also succeeded in taking control of a large portion of Byzantine Armenia. Thus, the killing of Acacius was not an isolated act, but a catalyst for launching the rebellion as well as an effective blow that paralyzed the imperial military and political authorities in Armenia. That is why after the assassination of Acacius Justinian was compelled to dispatch against the Armenians a punitive army “from Byzantium,” led by Sittas, at that time one of his two most talented and famous generals, who, moreover, was married to Comito, Justinian’s sister-in-law and the Empress Theodora’s sister (Justinian’s other preeminent general was Belisarius).

նութիւնը և ծանոթագրութիւնները՝ Ստ. Մալխասյանցի: Երևանի համալսարանի հրատ., 1987, [hereafter – Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*. Transl. and commentary by S. Malkhasiantz], Yerevan State University Press, 1987, V.44) and Sebeos (Սեբեոսի եպիսկոպոսի Պատմութիւն [The History of Bishop Sebeos, preparation of the text, the preface and commentary by G. V. Abgaryan], Yerevan, 1979), p. 165; cf. S. Malkhasyantz’ publication of the same *History* (Yerevan, 1939), p. 142.

26 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101 (on the limits of Ekeghyats, see *ibid.*, pp. 44-45); Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 209-210.

27 Based on the fact that we know the names of only three Armenian princely houses (Arshakuni, Mamikonean and Bagratuni) in Byzantine (Interior) Armenia, Toumanoff believes that only one (unspecified) part of nine cantons or “lands” there was ruled by these Armenian clans, while “the rest of the territory, being princeless, must have been under the direct rule first of the Armenian Crown and Church and now of the Roman State” (Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, pp. 193-194). Nevertheless, completely ruling out the presence in this territory of other Armenian princely houses only on the basis that their names have not survived is rather excessive (cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 100).

Based on an official historical document, Adontz notes that "Sittas or Tzittas was apparently a nickname; the name of the general was Ursicius" or Ursuk, which indicates his possible eastern origin.²⁸ Jones, Evans, Greatrex and Jacobsen consider Sittas an Armenian, however, only the first of these authors tries to substantiate this claim by an explanation, alleging that "Sittas's nationality is inferred from his name."²⁹ Martindale, again judging by Sittas's name, opines that "he was possibly of Gothic origin."³⁰ It remains, however, unclear how exactly this name associates Sittas either with Armenians or Goths. Likewise, without any supporting evidence, R. Browning calls him Thracian.³¹ The most specific report about Sittas's ethnic background is provided by Chamchian. Using no extant primary source and talking about a "man skilled in warfare," whom Justinian appointed "the [chief] prince and general over the Armenian princes [in Byzantium]" and married him to Comito, the Empress Theodora's sister, Chamchian identified him as an Armenian prince (*nakharar*) by the name Tachat (Տաճատ).³² Chamchian, however, failed to notice that he was talking about Sittas, whom he mentioned separately, in connection with the Armenian rebellion!³³ Anyway, Chamchian's statement still awaits its researcher and verification of reliability and validity.

28 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 111, 417, n. 22.

29 Jones, Arnold H. M. *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic & Administrative Survey* (Oxford: Blackwell-University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), Vol. I-II, pp. 271, 1124 (n. 9); Evans, J. A. S. *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 52; Greatrex, Geoffrey. "Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century," in Maas, Michael. *The Cambridge Companion Guide to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 481; Jacobsen, Torsten Cumberland. *The Gothic War: Rome's Final Conflict in the West* (Yardley: Westholme, 2009), p. 4.

30 Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1160-1163.

31 Browning, Robert. *Justinian and Theodora*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 74.

32 Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, 240.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

After arriving from the capital of Empire to Byzantine Armenia probably in the first half of 539, Sittas initially refrained from starting active hostilities against the Armenian rebel army. Procopius of Caesarea reports the following about his intentions:

So he came to Armenia, but at first he entered upon the war reluctantly and exerted himself to calm the people and to restore the population to their former habitations, promising to persuade the emperor to remit to them the payment of the new tax.³⁴

In Constantinople meanwhile Adolius, son of the murdered Aca-cius, repeatedly undermined Sittas through direct reports to Justinian, citing the general's sluggishness. However, as shown by subsequent martial developments, the behavior of this experienced military commander was well founded, and blaming him for inoperativeness was unfair. The point is that Sittas was exceptionally knowledgeable in Armenian affairs: in the Byzantine-Sassanid war of 526-532, he had led, on equal footing with Belisarius, military campaigns in Armenia. In addition, in 528-531 he was also the first commander-in-chief of the newly formed military district, which brought together all Armenian lands under the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire (*see* Map 1). Officially, this new post was called *magister militum per Armeniam et Pontum Polemoniacum et gentes*.³⁵ *Magister militum* was the highest military rank in the Empire (meaning in Latin, literally – the Master of Soldiers; in Greek – *strategos* or *stratelates*). As observed by Adontz, "There were only five such *magistri* in the whole of the empire: two in the capital, one in the East, and two in the West. The appointment

34 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.9.

35 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 133-137; Toumanoff, Cyril. "Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period," *Traditio*, Vol. 17 (1961), pp. 24, 46; Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II*, pp. 83-84.

of such an important official in Armenia testifies to the importance given to the eastern frontier of the Empire at that time.³⁶ Simultaneously, Sittas managed to obtain from the Emperor the right to recruit Armenians into the imperial military service, “because of their familiarity with the localities in Armenia.”³⁷ Thus, starting from 528, the Armenian princes were silently deprived of, at least two of their privileges, which formed the political foundation of their local national autonomy – “the immunity from imperial garrisons and the right to maintain armed forces.”³⁸ It should be added that before Justinian’s reign, “Interior Armenia was a country as free as the autonomous Satrapies”, “a federated territory.” In 530s the freedom from taxation, another of the privileges of the *foederati*, was violated as well.³⁹

What has not been specifically accentuated about Sittas is that with these military administrative reforms he was made the first commander-in-chief of the newly-formed mobile field Army of Armenia.⁴⁰ Later, in the mid-seventh century, when Greek fully became the empire’s dominant language, the names of the armies had also been Hellenized and “the Army of Armenia became the Armeniac Theme.”⁴¹ Apparently it was the same Byzantine military unit that in

36 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 108.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II,” pp. 24, 46; cf. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, p. 155.

39 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 91. The only difference from Satrapies, according to Adontz, was that “a representative of Imperial power had his seat” in Interior Armenia, who was called the Count of Armenia – *Comes Armeniae* (*Ibid.*, p. 93).

40 For the creation of the Army of Armenia and its estimated total strength of at least 15,000 men (which will be discussed later in this study), see Treadgold, Warren T. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081* (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 15-17, 20, 60-63, 70, 107, 152; *Idem, A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 178, 928, n. 2; cf. Bradbury, Jim. *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 58.

41 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 23.

mid-640s was called by one Arabic source “*Armeniakon*.”⁴² Curiously, in the fourth and fifth centuries, and possibly much earlier, the united Armenian army, which included the combined royal, princely and all other available military forces of the kingdom of Great Armenia, had the same designation of Army of Armenia (*Hayastan gund* or *Hayotz Gund*), concisely referred to as *Armenia* (*Hayastan*).⁴³

Sittas knew firsthand about the high combat capability of the Armenian troops: twelve years earlier he, together with Belisarius, had already suffered a defeat from them. It happened, when the Byzantine army, commanded jointly by Sittas and Belisarius, after the first successful raid into Persarmenia in 526 or early 527, again invaded it in the first half of 527.⁴⁴ This time, however, an Armenian army, led by the gifted generals, brothers Nerseh (called Narses in Byzantium) and Hrahat (Aratius) Kamsarakan,⁴⁵ suddenly attacked the Byzantines and won a stunning victory. Here is what Procopius of Caesarea reports on this:

42 Haldon, John F., *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 216.

43 See ԱՐՄԵՆ ԱՅԿԱՎՅԱՆ, Հարկահան ինքնության հիմնաքարերը. լեզու, բանակ, պետություն [Ayvazyan, Armen. *The Cornerstones of Armenian Identity: The Language, Army and State*], Yerevan, 2007, pp. 114-116.

44 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.24. The battle here is dated on the basis of Procopius’s report that shortly afterwards the death of Emperor Justin occurred, who died, as is known, on August 1, 527. J. Evans, in effect, also finds that this battle took place in 527, since he dates the desertion from Persia and siding of brothers Aratius and Narses Kamsarakan with Justinian “some three years later” – in 530 (Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, pp. 52, 115). Correspondingly, the first incursion into Persarmenia by Sittas and Belisarius is dated in 526 by Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 83.

45 For identification of the brothers Narses, Aratius and Isaac, the generals from Persarmenia, with the brothers Nerseh, Hrahat and Sahak of the princely house of Kamsarakans, see Stein E., *Histoire du Bas-Empire*. T. II (Paris-Bruxelles-Amsterdam, 1949), p. 292, n. 1; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 318; Ն. Աղոնց, *Երկեր* [N. Adontz, *Studies*], Yerevan State University Press, 2006, pp. 216, 493. Cf. Chamchian, M. *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 241; *Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I, pp. 322-323, n. 105; Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, pp. 231; Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 103-104; Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 115.

*And the Romans, under the leadership of Sittas and Belisarius, made an inroad into Persarmenia, a territory subject to the Persians, where they plundered a large tract of country and then withdrew with a great multitude of Armenian captives. ... But when a second inroad had been made by the Romans into Armenia, Narses and Aratius unexpectedly confronted them and engaged them in battle... on the present occasion they joined battle with the forces of Sittas and Belisarius and gained the advantage over them.*⁴⁶

Using the description above, it is possible to visualize the most likely scenario of this battle: the Armenian cavalry, which “was then considered one of the best, if not the best, in the Near East,”⁴⁷ swooped down on either the camp or, more probably, marching columns of the Byzantine army and, in the ensuing battle – or rather the meeting engagement – overran it. Having suffered heavy losses, Belisarius and Sittas were forced to withdraw from Persarmenia. That it was precisely a battle is confirmed by Procopius later on another occasion, when he states that Narses and Aratius “had an encounter with Sittas and Belisarius in the land of the Persarmenians” (Chekalova’s Rus-

46 Procopius adds that at that time Sittas and Belisarius were still at the beginning of their long military career: “These two men were both youths and wearing their first beards, body-guards of the general Justinian, who later shared the empire with his uncle Justinus.” (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.12.20-22). Later, in 530 or 531, Nerseh and Hrahat, together with their youngest brother Sahak (Isaac), went over to Justinian and, at the head of the Armenian contingents (*ibid.*, II.24.12), distinguished themselves in many battles this time in the army of the Eastern Roman Empire: “These men not long after this came to the Romans as deserters, and made the expedition to Italy with Belisarius” (*ibid.*, I.12.20-22).

47 Дмитриев, В. А. «Всадники в сверкающей броне». Военное дело Сасанидского Ирана и история римско-персидских войн (Санкт-Петербург: Изд. «Петербургское востоковедение»), СПб., 2008, с. 42-43, 214; cf. Dédéyan, G. “Le cavalier arménien,” in Jean-Pierre Mahé & Robert W. Thomson (ed.), *From Byzantium to Iran. Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoian* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 197-222; *Idem*, “Les Arméniens soldats de Byzance (IVe-XIe siècles),” *Bazmavep* 145 (1987), pp. 162-92.

sian translation reads this statement as the “hand to hand fighting”).⁴⁸ Although the available information is quite scarce, it nevertheless suggests that the Kamsarakan brothers gained this victory by, inter alia, getting timely and accurate intelligence, effectively employing the elements of surprise, stealth troop movements, and, possibly, the establishment of ambushes and pre-positioning of some of their forces in secret locations. This victory over Belisarius and Sittas has lately been mentioned by several modern historians, among them, L. Fauber reasonably assuming that it brought upon Aratius and Narses “the eagle eyes of the East Roman diplomatic service,” which later successfully lured these Armenian generals from Persia to Byzantium.⁴⁹

In 539, Sittas’s decision-making and initial avoidance of hostilities undoubtedly must have also been affected by those bitter memories from twelve years ago, though this time he was facing the Roman rather than Persian Armenian army. In point of fact, his adversaries were his former comrades-in-arms. Analyzing the developments in Byzantine Armenia proper, it is of paramount importance to take note of and explicate Procopius’s mutually complementary reports that (a) after assassinating Acacius, the Armenians “fled for refuge to Phrangium” (i.e. Sper), and (b) that upon his arrival in Armenia, Sittas “exerted himself... to restore the population to their former habitations.” This evidence strongly suggests that the Armenian troops had

48 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.15.31-32.

49 Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, *op. cit.*, p. 115; Дмитриев, «Всадники в сверкающей броне», с. 224-225; Fauber, L. H. *Narses: the Hammer of the Goths*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1990, pp. 3-4; Hughes, Ian. *Belisarius: The Last Roman General* (Yardley: Westholme, 2009), pp. 42, 59, 256, 260. Although Procopius’s report about this victory was translated into Armenian by H. Bartikyan as early as 1967 (*Byzantine Sources*, Vol. I., pp. 29-30), paradoxically, the Armenian historians themselves have by and large overlooked it. As a result, it is mentioned neither in the school textbook, nor a number of historical studies on this particular period, including the academic multi-volume Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն [History of the Armenian people, Vol. II, ed. by S. T. Yeremyan], Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of Arm. SSR, 1984). In passing, this battle has been mentioned by V. Iskanyan, who incorrectly dates it in AD 530 (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 231).

their time to concentrate and gain a foothold in mountain areas and fortresses between the cantons of Sper and, as will be shown below, Basean (the latter was in Persarmenia, see Map 1) before Sittas and his army arrived in Armenia. The consolidation process of the Armenian armed forces in Byzantine Armenia was, naturally, accompanied by a structural reorganization, accelerated military preparations, including the approval, appointment or election of a unified command, high intensity tactical and martial arts training, stockpiling of weapons, food supplies and forage.

After assessing the situation, Sittas realized that a direct attack on the strong defensive positions of the Armenians was unlikely to end well for his army. Hence, he tried to find a diplomatic, rather than a military solution to the conflict. His approach was remarkably consistent with the Byzantine strategy of war, codified a little later in a number of military manuals and regulations and, particularly, in Maurice's *Strategikon*.⁵⁰ Incidentally, the recommendation to avoid any open engagements, unless there is extreme necessity or in the presence of a minimum threefold numerical superiority over the enemy, was also articulated by the contemporaneous Sassanid military theory – which was in many respects identical to the Byzantine art of war –

50 In his discussion of Byzantine approach towards decisive battles, W. Kaegi underlines that “sophisticated treatises on war and sophisticated commanders usually displayed a reluctance to gamble everything in the pitched battle. ... the decisive battle held too many pitfalls, political and economic as well as military” (Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr., *Some thoughts on Byzantine military strategy*. Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1983, pp. 1, 6, 8, etc.). F. Engels observed that Belisarius's tactics was based on the principle “of starving out the enemy and avoiding the close combat” (Ф. Энгельс, *Избранные военные произведения*, Москва: Воениздат, 1956, с. 188). The tactical approaches of Belisarius and, indirectly, of other major generals of Justinian era were even more precisely characterized by Liddell Hart: “Belisarius had no lack of audacity, but his tactics were to allow – or tempt – the other side to do the attacking” (Hart, Liddell B. H. *Strategy*. Second revised edition. New York: A Meridian Book, 1991, p. 40). Hughes reasonably argues that the cautious conduct and preference for a defensive posture by Belisarius was permanently affected by his earlier defeats on the eastern front (Hughes, Ian. *Belisarius*, pp. 246-247).

particularly, in the military treatise *Ayeen-Nameh (Book of the statutes)*, the fragments of which have been preserved in Arabic translation.⁵¹

However, as it often happens nowadays as well, the analysis of an overall geostrategic situation made in the state's capital prevailed over the tactical considerations of the field commander. After repeatedly “assailing him with frequent reproaches for his hesitation,”⁵² Justinian in the end bluntly ordered Sittas to immediately begin hostilities against the Armenians. Procopius explains the Emperor's decision by “the slanders of Adolius, the son of Acacius.”⁵³ The repeated character of these denunciations are themselves evidence of quite lengthy, though ultimately abortive, attempts by Sittas to pacify the rebellious Armenians with promises of easing colonial policies of the Empire, including those related to taxation. One may surmise, in turn, that Armenian forces were unwavering in their cause and were preparing to respond with armed resistance against the imperial army.

Yet the main reasons behind the haste of Justinian to endeavor to suppress the Armenian rebellion lay, no doubt, in a completely different dimension, that of geopolitics. It was at this juncture that the army under the command of Belisarius, with the extreme commitment of forces, was waging war against the Ostrogoths in Italy, while other troops of the empire were dispersed at a great distance from each other. The war against the Ostrogoths was fought with varied success, and its outcome was far from clear. Witiges, king of the Ostrogoths,

51 Иностранцев, К. А. *Сасанидские этюды*. СПб., 1909, с. 47-49; ср. В. А. Дмитриев, «Всадники в сверкающей броне», с. 98-100. The factors that contributed to interaction and mutual borrowings of Sassanid and late Roman military theories were plausibly pointed out by Dmitriyev (*ibid.*, с. 94), and earlier by A. Hakobyan, who studied a few interpenetrations of tactical elements into respective armies (see Հ. Հակոբյան, Հռոմեա-արևելյան առնչությունները ռազմական տակտիկայի բնագավառում. Բանբեր Երևանի համալսարանի [Hakobyan, A. P. “The Roman-Eastern Contacts in the Field of Military Tactics,” *Yerevan University Journal*], 1983, No. 3, pp. 49-70).

52 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.10.

53 *Ibid.*

arranged the blockade of Rome in the period between March 2, 537 to March 12, 538.⁵⁴ In June, 538, Justinian sent to the aid of Belisarius a 7000-strong army under the command of Narses, a highly influential Persarmenian aristocrat in the imperial court (not to be confused with Nerseh Kamsarakan who was also called Narses in Byzantium).⁵⁵ At the end of March, 539, Ostrogoths seized the besieged Milan, the second largest city in Italy after Rome. Moreover, as noted by modern military historians Ernest and Trevor Dupui, during the same time, "Justinian was extremely worried about the renewed attacks of Transdanubian barbarians – the Bulgars and the Slavs, as well as with the threat of resumption of war with Khosrov [I Anushirvan] the Persian,⁵⁶ who entered into negotiations with Witiges."⁵⁷ Therefore, a rapid defeat of the Armenian rebellion was essential for Justinian to thereby prevent or preempt the anticipated opening of a second front by Persia in the east (which, nevertheless, happened shortly thereafter, in 540). On the other hand, by raising the rebellion precisely in 538 (most likely in its second half), the leaders of the Byzantine Armenians, undoubtedly, tried to make use of reliable information about the predicament of the Eastern Roman Empire on the Western Front, as well as took into account that imperial armed forces were stretched too thin and had at that point scarce resources for mobilization. The time for an uprising was thus chosen exceptionally well. It is more than probable that in an effort to find allies the Armenian rebel forces in advance of or during the uprising directly approached the Persian King Khosrov and Ostrogothic King Witiges, who was extremely in-

54 Р. Эрнест Дьюпуи, Тревор Н. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, СПб-Москва, 1997, с. 384.

55 Narses was acting as the commander of a separate army for the first time, yet he was bestowed a military rank equal to that of Belisarius.

56 In the English-language historical literature, the name of this Persian king has been spelled variously as Xosrov, Khosrau, Khusrau, Khusro, Chosroes.

57 Э. Дьюпуи, Т. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 385.

terested in opening of the second front in the east of the Empire and to this end sent ambassadors to Persia in 538 or 539.⁵⁸ In any case, speaking in front of Khosrov I at the end of 539, the delegation of Armenian rebel leaders demonstrated good knowledge of geopolitical situation, in particular, the ongoing war of the empire in Italy.⁵⁹ All of this indicates a rather methodical groundwork done by the Armenian leadership before the uprising, including the collection and analysis of intelligence data through the utilization of Armenian network resources in the Byzantine military and imperial court.

After receiving a sharp reprimand from Justinian, Sittas was finally forced to lead his army into action. No precise information about its size is available in the primary sources, unfortunately. However, based on indirect evidence, it is possible to answer this question with reasonable reliability.

The total number of Justinian's troops, in traditional academic opinion, was estimated at around 150,000,⁶⁰ but modern scholars convincingly argue 300,000 to be a much more realistic figure.⁶¹ In any case, since the late 520s the newly-formed mobile Army of Armenia included, according to Justinian's pertinent decree, several *numeri* (legions or regiments) "chosen from the ones in the capital, those in the East as well as certain others;" while according to Malalas four

58 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.2.1-12.

59 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.32-53. Subsequently, the information about the treason of Belisarius proved to be false. The pertinent rumors, however, originated from the Ostrogoths' real offer to Belisarius to recognize him "the Emperor of the West." This development was so significant as to alarm Justinian himself (see Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, II.29).

60 Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, p. 301; Norwich, John Julius. *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 259; Э. Дьюпуи, Т. Дьюпуи, *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 390; Delbrück considers even 150,000 soldiers to be a possible exaggeration (см. Дельбрюк, *op. cit.* pp. 356-357)

61 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 63; Haldon, John. *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London: UCL Press, 1999), pp. 99-101; Maas, *The Cambridge Companion Guide to the Age of Justinian*, pp. 117-118.

numeri were received from the *stratelates* of the *East* alone, that is from the Army of the East.⁶² The Army of Armenia was largely stationed in Byzantine Armenia, including in major strongholds of Martyropolis, Kitarich (Kitharizon), Artales (Artaleson), Theodosiopolis, Oron (Horonon) and Tzanzak (Tzanzakon) in the front line of defense, and Melitene and Satagh (Satala) in the second line.⁶³

Modern research points to about 5,000 soldiers "in normal divisions," during Justinian's rule.⁶⁴ It is impossible to establish correctly

62 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 134; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 107-108; Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 83.

63 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 140-141; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 113. See also "Map 7. The Army of the Empire about 565" in Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 63.

64 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 61; cf. Roth, Jonathan. "The Size and Organization of the Roman Imperial Legion," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 43, H. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1994), pp. 346-362. According to Vegetius Renuatus, a military writer of the early fifth century, a legion consisted of 6,100 infantrymen and 726 cavalrymen; John the Lydian, an author of the sixth century, also counts 6,000 men in one legion (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 77; cf. Flavius Vegetius Renuatus, *The Military Institutions of the Romans (De Re Militari)*. Transl. From the Latin by Lieutenant John Clarke. — in *Roots of Strategy: The 5 Greatest Military Classics of All Time*. Vol. I, ed. by Gen. Thomas R. Phillips. Mechanicsbook, PA: Stackpole Books, 1985, p. 104). Both these writers, however, referred to legionary strengths prior to the reforms of Constantine the Great. R. Cagnat, in principle, agrees to accept 6,000 as a credible strength of one legion, with the reservation that this major military unit itself was subdivided into smaller legions of 1,000 (Cagnat, R. "Legio," *Le Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines de Daremberg et Saglio*, Tome 3, vol. 2, pp. 1047-1093). In the period from II c. BC to I c. AD, the number of legion ranged between 5,000 and 2,500 men (см.: Cowan, Ross. *Roman Battle Tactics, 109 BC-AD 313*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007, p. 4). According to some authors, in IV-V centuries provincial legions consisted of 1000 soldiers (Tomlin, Roger "The Mobile army", in Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War*. London-Hong Kong: Macdonald, 1981, p. 255). Dyupuis argue that in the era of Justinian "the Roman legion, as an organizational and tactical unit, retained nothing but its name. Legion was now called a detachment of troops of various number and organization" (Дьюпуи, Э., Дьюпуи, Т. *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 377). The question of the size of the Roman army is discussed in detail in the following studies: Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, pp. 299-301, 379, 679-686; MacMullen, R. "How Big was the Roman Imperial Army?," *Klio* 62/2 (1980), pp. 451-60.

the definite strength for the *numeri* in question because *numerus/arithmos* was a generic reference to a number/unit of troops. If one, however, conditionally accepts that the four *numeri* transferred from the Army of the East to the new Army of Armenia were "normal divisions" with 5,000 men in each, then the total strength of the latter, counting also the forces that arrived from the capital and elsewhere, should be calculated more than 20,000 soldiers. Such strength of the Army of Armenia exceeds Treadgold's estimate of 15,000 soldiers⁶⁵ and approaches Adontz's assessment that the *magister* of Armenia possibly had an ability to field a force of more than 30,000 cavalry and infantry.⁶⁶ Adontz believed that the imperial army in the east "cannot have disposed of an army inferior to that of *dux Armeniae*," whose forces, according to his estimates based on evidence from *Notitia dignitatum*, a well-known official document of the fifth century, included "2 regiments of archer cavalry; 3 legions or counting 6,000 men a piece = 18,000 men; 11 divisions of cavalry, at 600 each = 6,600 men; 10 cohorts of infantry, at 600 each = 6,000 men,"⁶⁷ that is a total of 30,600 men. Adontz also held that in the fifth century "an army of up to 100,000 men, in round numbers, stood under the orders of the *magister militum per Orientem*."⁶⁸ However, projecting this last number onto the exceptionally overstrained years of 538-539, seems to be absolutely impossible for the Empire. These various figures and

65 See Treadgold. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, pp. 60-63, 107. Treadgold's estimate is based on Procopius's reference to the 15,000 horsemen of the Army of Armenia at the Battle of Satala in 530 (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.15.11). Treadgold also holds that "remarkably, of the 15,000 troops of Justinian's Army of Armenia, 14,000 seem to have survived the seventh and eight centuries to become the garrison of the Armeniac Theme, a loss of not quite 7 percent" (Treadgold. *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 70). Haldon, however, assigns to the Army of Armenia a nominal strength of about 12,000 in the 630s (John Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*. The Mill, UK: The History Press, 2008, p. 60)

66 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 111-112.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

calculations come to suggest that it is perhaps premature to decide on the exact number of the Army of Armenia, because it could have fluctuated from 15,000 up to 20,000-25,000 soldiers during Justinian's rule.

From 531 onwards Sittas was no longer the commander of the Army of Armenia and after September 532, when the peace with the Persians was finally concluded, resided in Constantinople.⁶⁹ Telling about the events of 538-539, Procopius reports that, "the emperor sent Sittas against them (i.e. the Armenian rebels – A.A.) from Byzantium."⁷⁰ In this connection, the most intriguing question for a historian should be whether the Army of Armenia was in place by the time Sittas arrived in Armenia or had it already become partly, if not largely, the very Armenian rebel army itself! Indeed, before 538, the main Armenian rebel forces were undoubtedly part of the Byzantine army. The Armenian noblemen – and first among them the Mamikoneans, the Arshakunis and the Bagratunis as well as their retinues – represented the elite heavy cavalry (*cataphractii*), and therefore they must have been integrated into the mobile field Army of Armenia and intended for conducting maneuver warfare, rather than just be assigned to garrisoning frontier fortresses and guarding the borders of the empire. It would be safe to assume that the core of the Armenian rebel army was represented if not almost entirely by the Army of Armenia, then at least by some of its major combat units. In other words, the Armenian uprising itself was a sort of mutiny by the Army of Armenia, largely comprised of the local Armenians. The most plausible historical scenario, consequently, could be that Sittas's first

69 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.8. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 136; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 109-110. Martindale notes that the absence of references to Sittas in connection with the Nika riot (January 532) suggests that he was not present in Constantinople at the time and was therefore probably still in the east (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1162).

70 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.8.

task was to join the strong reinforcements that he brought from the capital with the whole Army of the East and remnants of the Army of Armenia and only then to lead these united forces against the rebels.

Bearing in mind that during the previous war with the Persians combat-capable imperial forces in the east consisted of 25-30 thousand men,⁷¹ and that four years later, in 543, "the Emperor could muster some 30,000 troops on the Armenian frontier,"⁷² it can be assumed that approximately the same number of troops was present in the army of Sittas in 539, because he, after all, was sent to the East not only with the objective of suppressing the Armenian uprising at an early stage, but also for repelling a possible Persian invasion, which was expected to happen imminently.⁷³ Justinian could not have underestimated this double threat in the east and should have taken all the necessary measures to compensate for the loss of – all or part of – the Army of Armenia.

The seemingly small numbers of Byzantine forces should not be misleading. The warriors of Justinian were prepared so well, and his generals were tactically so skillful, that they repeatedly defeated the numerically preponderant enemies, thanks especially to their superior performance in tactical and operational maneuver and implementation of well calibrated defensive-offensive strategy, as well as good use

71 Дельбрюк, *Всеобщая история военного искусства...*, с. 356.

72 Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, p. 171. According to John of Ephesus, a little bit later, in the 570s, the united Roman armies of Armenia and Mesopotamia amounted to 120,000 men (Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 286, n. 19).

73 On the basis of one specific report referring to 530 (Proc. Bell. Pers., I.15.11), Treadgold offers a similar total strength of Byzantine field troops in the east in the 530s and 540s, though in different make-up: "Combined with the Army of the East, the Army of Armenia increased the field troops facing the Persians from twenty thousand to thirty-five thousand men" (Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 178), implying, however, that these best 35,000 included the soldiers of only mobile armies, while various other units were active during wartime as well.

of various strategems and archery.⁷⁴ For example, Belisarius landed in Africa with 15,000-strong army, of which 5,000 cavalrymen were sufficient to rout the tenfold larger Vandal army in the open field (the battle of Tricameron, December 15, 533).⁷⁵ Belisarius and Narses conquered Italy with armies numbering just up to 25,000 men.⁷⁶ Both primary sources and modern scholars have highly appreciated the strategic talent of Sittas, noting that as a general he was not inferior to Belisarius, and as a politician, even exceeded him.⁷⁷ Procopius of Caesarea talks about “his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy,” adding that he was “a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries.”⁷⁸ Among these contemporaries Procopius meant, certainly, Belisarius and Narses, who, as a general, earned fame somewhat later.⁷⁹ The chronicler John Malalas makes a short remark on Sittas: “he was a warlike man.”⁸⁰ Sittas and Belisarius were identified as

74 Hart, *Strategy*, pp. 39-54; Luttwak, Edward N. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 79-81).

75 Дельбрюк, *ук. соч.*, с. 356; Дьюпуи, Дьюпуи, Э. Т. *Всемирная история войн*. Т. I, с. 383. Incidentally, another Armenian commander, John the Armenian, was in control of the center and most possibly of the whole battle of Tricameron (see Hughes, *Belisarius*, pp. 101, 105, 247).

76 Диль, Ш. *Юстиниан и византийская цивилизация в VI веке*, СПб, 1908, с. 151.

77 Прокопий Кесарийский. *Война с персами. Война с вандалами. Тайная история*. Изд. второе, исправленное и дополненное. Перевод с греч., вступительная статья, комментарии А.А. Чекаловой. СПб.: “Алетейя”, 2001, с. 389, прим. 102; cf. F. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, T. 2, pp. 288-289.

78 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.26.

79 Narses is considered as “the better tactician” than Belisarius by Luttwak, while Fuller argues that “both were able tacticians, and in different ways staunch disciplinarians, but as a strategist Narses was probably the superior, as he certainly was in statecraft” (see Fuller, J. F. C. *A Military History of the Western World. Vol. 1: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Lepanto* (NY: Funk and Wagnalis Company, 1954), p. 309; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 80; ср. Диль, *ук. соч.*, с. 175-176, 423).

80 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 108. On the military career of Sittas, see: Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.12.20-22; 15.3, 4, 10, 12, 24; 21. 3, 9, 23, 27; II. 3. 8-28;

the greatest Byzantine generals of the time by Armenian rebel leaders, as they spoke at the Persian court in late autumn of 539: “the two generals who were the best they had, we come here having slain the one, Sittas.”⁸¹

To clarify the situation on the other side of the confrontation the same two pivotal questions need to be answered: who was the commander of Armenian rebel forces and what was his army’s strength in 538-539?

Although in their statement before the Persian King, the leaders of the uprising noticed that some of them were Arshakuni – “Many of us, O Master, are Arsacidae”⁸² – this does not in any way mean that the commander-in-chief of the Armenian insurgent army was also an Arshakuni. The answer to the first question is, nevertheless, unequivocal: the military head of the rebels was Vasak (*Bassaces*) Mamikonean. This conclusion could be made on a pair of reports by Procopius, according to whom: first, it was Vasak who in fall of 539 led the retreat of Armenian rebels (among whom was also Artabanes Arshakuni, who customarily is considered to be their leader) into the Persian empire: “they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man,” second, that it was again under his leadership that later, in 542, the same Armenian noblemen returned to the Byzantine Empire.⁸³ Pro-

Proc., *Bell. Vand.*, II. 27. 17; Procopius of Caesaria, *History of the Wars: The Persian War*. Vol. I, Book 2, pp. 101, 131, 133, 137, 139, 195, 197, 201; cf. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 1160-1163).

81 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.52.

82 *Ibid.*, II.3.32.

83 *Ibid.*, II.3.31; II.21.34. Prior to the present study, only C. Toumanoff, in a brief footnote to one of his articles and apparently on the same grounds (cf. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209), opined that the true leader of this rebellion, in fact, was Vasak Mamikonean, rather than an Arshakuni prince: “Since the leader of this insurrection, Vasak, appears to have been a Mamikonid and not an Arsacid, Procopius very likely simplifies the story by making of it an *Arsacid* insurrection. The paucity of dynasts in Inner Armenia must have helped to create the impression that they were all of one family” (Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian

copius reports only the name of this commander of the Armenians – *Bassaces*. Adontz and Toumanoff correctly concluded that he was of Mamikonean clan⁸⁴, but provided no further clarifications, which are nonetheless needed.

First, the name Vasak was one of the favorites among the Mamikoneans. Second, Vasak was not an Arshakuni prince because he was a son-in-law of John (Hovhannes) Arshakuni.⁸⁵ Neither was he a Bagratuni, since the latter's contingent joined the main body of the Armenian rebel army on the very eve of the decisive battle (this question is explored in the next chapters). Finally, the recognition of a Mamikonean prince as the military leader of the rebellion was natural, because this clan represented the hereditary Armenian *sparapets* (commanders-in-chief), ardent patriots and, more importantly, unsurpassed masters of warfare in Armenia.⁸⁶ After the fall of the kingdom of Arshakunis in 428 AD, the Mamikoneans always stood at the head of national-liberation wars, specifically in 450-451, 481-484, 571-572 against Persia and in 747-753, 772-775 against the Arab Caliphate. Thus, this list of Armenian uprisings led by the Mamikoneans should naturally be

Caucasian History: II," p. 47, n. 218; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196, n. 218). However, in the body text to this very note Toumanoff, contradicting himself, reiterated the conventional version that this "revolt... was led by Arsacid princes" (ibid.). Chamchian and Adontz unambiguously considered John (Hovhannes) and Artabanes Arshakuni leaders of the revolt (Chamchian, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 241; Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 124; cf. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 99). Following in their steps, V. Iskanyan wrote that "from beginning to the end, the rebellion was headed by the father and son Hovhannes and Artavan Arshakunis" (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 214). The same incorrect belief appears in the school textbook of "History of Armenia" («Հայոց պատմություն», Yerevan, 2005, p. 109). Yerevan, 2005, p. 109).

84 Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 125-126; Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194 (n. 209); 196 (n. 218).

85 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.28-31.

86 See, for example, my study on *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, the 4-5th Centuries* (Yerevan, 2000, in Armenian).

complemented by the rebellion of 538-539. It is also important to note that after the partition of Armenia in 387 the post and title of *sparapet* of the Armenian troops were not abolished in Byzantine Armenia and survived until Justinian carried out his military and administrative reforms.⁸⁷ As pointed out by Adontz: "Imperial armies were stationed neither in the Satrapies nor in Armenia Interior in this period, the defense of the frontier being entrusted to native troops until 529 when Justinian first appointed a *magister militum per Armeniam* and three dukes under his command."⁸⁸ Apparently, Vasak Mamikonean was the last Armenian *sparapet* of Byzantine Armenia, since, as a result and at the end of Justinian's rule, the authority of Mamikoneans (as well as of

87 According to the 5th century Armenian author Yeghishe (Elishe, Eliseus), in 451 the *sparapet* of Byzantine Inner/Lower Armenia was once again the commander named Vasak Mamikonean (see Եղիշե, Վասն Վարդանայ եւ Հայոց պատերազմին [Yeghishe, *On Vardan and the Armenian War*]. Ed. by Yervand Ter-Minasyan, Yerevan, 1957, Ch. 4, p. 93). Adontz raised a completely unjustified question about the possible sameness of this Vasak Mamikonean ("the *sparapet* of Lower Armenia") with the leader of the Armenian rebellion of 538-539. This assumption, however, is devoid of any basis and is founded only on the frivolous manipulation of the revisionist postulate about Yeghishe being an author of the sixth, rather than the fifth century (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 414, n. 66). Toumanoff expressed his strong disagreement with Adontz's opinion, noting the possibility of the existence of both Mamikonean Vasaks as well as stressing that Adontz's argument "can have no bearing on the date of Eliseus" (Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209). Meanwhile, both Adontz and Toumanoff are of the opinion that a separate branch of Mamikoneans existed in Byzantine Armenia, more precisely, in canton Ekeghyats (Ekelisene/Akilesene) (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 100-101; Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 194, n. 209). Koryun, another 5th century Armenian author, refers to certain Anatolius as *sparapet* (or *spayapet*) in the Byzantine part of Armenia during the early 420s (Կորյուն, Վարդ Մաշտոցի [Koryun, *The Life of Mashtots*]. Ed. by M. Abeghyan, in Armenian, Yerevan, 1941, Ch. 16, p. 64). However, this general was not, as Bedrosian wrongly concluded, the *sparapet* of Byzantine Armenia (Bedrosian, Robert, "The Sparapetut'iwn in Armenia in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *Armenian Review*, Summer 1983, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 12-13, n. 34). Koryun actually referred to Anatolius, the famous Roman general and diplomat, who was at that time and later, from 433 to 446, the *magister militum per Orientem* (see Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II*, pp. 37, 42-45, 53, 259, n. 60).

88 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 414, n. 66.

Bagratunis and Arshakunis) in this western part of Armenia had been severely undermined and reduced to almost nothing.⁸⁹

The other major figures of the rebellion, whose names have been reported by Procopius, were the two Arshakunis: John (Hovhannes) and his son Artabanes. They both were at the apex of the military command of the Armenian joint insurgent army. One of them, most probably the father, should have been elected to act as *sparapet* Vasak Mamikonean's deputy. Procopius's report about close friendship between John and Bouzes, another distinguished Byzantine commander, is sufficient to infer that, like his son, John Arshakuni also had a military background.⁹⁰ His initial acquaintance and further rapport between elder Arshakuni and Bouzes could have happened only in the ranks of the Byzantine army, where both Arshakunis as well as Vasak Mamikonean must have previously served – and conceivably fought – at the head of their Armenian contingents. Artabanes's brother John (Hovhannes) also participated in the uprising, and certainly in the capacity of an officer.⁹¹ However, the third position in the Armenian army's chain of command must have been reserved for a representative of the Bagratuni clan, who owned Sper, the area of original concentration of the Armenian troops. It is most likely that all or some of the Armenian rebel commanders served earlier in the Byzantine Army of Armenia.

The answer to the second question is not so obvious. One can only say with confidence that the number of soldiers in the Armenian rebel army in 539 must have been so impressive as to arouse Sittas's fears

89 Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 196.

90 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.28-31

91 Later Artavan's brother John served, apparently, as his deputy commander (Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.24.2). He also distinguished himself as a brave warrior, whose death in Libia in 546 was mourned by the emperor Justinian; as reported by Procopius: "In this battle John, the Armenian, brother of Artabanes, also died, after making a display of valorous deeds against the enemy. And the emperor, upon hearing this, was very deeply grieved because of the valour of John..." (Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.24.15-16).

of assuming an offensive against it.⁹² Large numbers of the Armenian troops are also implied by their willingness and ability to fight a decisive battle against the Byzantine army and defeat it (see below, ch. 3). Therefore, with a degree of conditionality, it may be assumed that the Armenian army consisted of between 10,000 and 20,000 soldiers. Apart from the princely regiments of heavy and light cavalry, it probably included also the infantry units as well as the militia, composed mainly of Armenian peasantry.⁹³

While the cavalry was the main striking force of the ancient and medieval Armenian armies and they could certainly be regarded as cavalry-centric, the primary sources have sufficiently recorded also the existence of various types of Armenian infantry such as archers, swordsmen, shield-bearers, slingers, special mountain troops and others.⁹⁴ Kaveh Farrokh justly observes that, besides the elite heavy cavalry, Armenian troops included also "valuable light cavalry and excellent infantry, who were especially proficient in using slings to repel enemy cavalry, as well as spears for hand-to-hand combat."⁹⁵ Moreover, as mentioned by Nicolle, "in 4th century Armenia there had been a special corps of mountain troops trained to roll rocks onto their foes; while in siege warfare Armenians were equipped with iron hooks to help them scale walls and large leather shields to protect their backs from rocks dropped from above."⁹⁶ In fact, the sizeable presence

92 V. Iskanyan correctly noted that "half-hearted actions by Sittas and his desire to split the Armenian movement indicate that the rebels represented a large force" (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 216).

93 The practice of mobilizing militia troops (*gugaz*) in Armenia was recorded as early as the 4th century (Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*, III. 8); cf. Нефедкин, А. К. "Военное дело армян и персов в 'Истории Армении' Фавстоса Бузанда," *Para Bellum*, № 32, 2010, с. 26, 33.

94 See, e.g., Pavstos Buzand, IV.20, V.5; cf. Нефедкин, "Военное дело армян и персов...", с. 26, 29.

95 Farrokh, Kaveh. *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), p. 26.

96 Nicolle, David. *Romano-Byzantine Armies 4th-9th centuries* (Oxford: Osprey

of infantry in Armenia was necessitated by its rugged terrain, which was especially suited, as has been noted by Treadgold, "to mountain fighting and ambushes."⁹⁷ Hence, Toumanoff's opinion that the "Armenian army... to all intents and purposes was exclusively cavalry" does not correspond to the historical reality.⁹⁸ However, the high level of mobility of the Armenian rebel force in 538-539 (discussed in the next chapters) is a strong indication that its mounted arm had perhaps a quantitative preponderance over its infantry. Treadgold calculates that a quarter of the Army of Armenia was cavalry,⁹⁹ though during the battle of Satala in 530 the 15,000-strong Army of Armenia is referred as almost entirely cavalry ("they were all cavalry").¹⁰⁰ These estimates may further suggest that in 538-539 absolute majority or all of mounted units of this army turned into Armenian rebels.

Publishing, 1992), p. 34.

97 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 114.

98 Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, p. 325; ср. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, с. 447.

99 Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284-1081*, p. 107.

100 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, 1.15.15.

3.

539 AD: The offensive of the Byzantine army and the battle of Avnik

As was already emphasized, preparing for an offensive against the Armenians, Sittas did not rely only on military strength, but was seeking to split the Armenians who had managed to join forces in Upper Armenia (Byzantine Inner Armenia). To that end he initiated separate negotiations with the Bagratunis, one of the three most powerful Armenian princely houses who participated in the revolt (excluding the Marnikoneans and Arshakunis):

"First of all he attempted by means of promises of many good things to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and to attach them to his cause, in order that the task of overpowering the others might be attended with less difficulty and toil. And the tribe called the Aspetiani (i.e. Bagratuni. - A.A.), great in power and in numbers, was willing to join him. And they went to Sittas and begged him to give them pledges in writing that, if they abandoned their kinsmen in the battle and came to the Roman army, they should remain entirely free from harm, retaining their own possessions. Now Sittas was delighted and wrote to them in tablets, giving them pledges just as they desired of him; he then sealed the writing and sent it to them. Then,

confident that by their help he would be victorious in the war without fighting, he went with his whole army to a place called Oenochalakon (Οινοχάλακων), where the Armenians had their camp."¹⁰¹

However, subsequent developments cast doubt on the claim that the Bagratunis were inclined to renege on the insurgents' cause. Here is what Procopius tells further:

*But by some chance those who carried the tablets went by another road and did not succeed at all in meeting the Aspetiani. Moreover a portion of the Roman army happened upon some few of them, and not knowing the agreement which had been made, treated them as enemies. And Sittas himself caught some of their women and children in a cave and slew them, either because he did not understand what had happened or because he was angry with the Aspetiani for not joining him as had been agreed.*¹⁰²

This narrative is contradictory. It is unclear why Sittas launched an all-out attack against the rebels without obtaining the Bagratunis' definitive consent to join his camp. In such historical situations, the agreements typically were secured by specific guarantees, such as the issuance or exchange of hostages. Sittas received neither a tangible guarantee from the Bagratunis, nor did he, for some reason, bother to wait for a day or two so that his message would have reached the addressee. Those who were carrying Sittas's message (following the logic of Procopius's report, they should have been the Bagratunis' men), somehow failed to find their masters, which also seems unlikely. Soon after the Byzantine army set out against the Armenians, one of its large contingents under the command of one of Sittas's commanders en-

¹⁰¹ Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.11-15.

¹⁰² Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.16-18.

countered a small force of the Bagratunis and engaged it. This implies that Sittas had not notified his commanders about the alleged agreement with the Bagratunis, which is a clear evidence that no agreement was finalized. Finally, Sittas himself massacred some of the Bagratuni women and children who had taken refuge in a cave. Such behavior was absolutely incompatible with the existence of any agreement with the Bagratunis.

All of these incidents together, and especially Sittas and his army's violent actions against the Bagratuni clan, do not fit well with Procopius's version about the desire of Bagratuni to switch sides. This whole affair can be rationalized if one makes the opposite assumption, namely, that Sittas truly proposed to the Bagratunis to abandon the rebels, but they refused to betray their brothers-in-arms, and exactly because of this were subjected by the Byzantines to violent retribution.¹⁰³ But such an interpretation would imply a deliberate distortion of historical reality on the part of Procopius of Caesarea. Upon closer examination of this tangled web of events, however, its subtext looks much more complex than it appears at first glance. Since Procopius impartially recounted the anti-Armenian atrocities of the Byzantine army, it is highly unlikely that he had misrepresented the previous historical facts about the negotiations, preliminary agreements and then sudden falling-out and fighting between Sittas and the Bagratunis. Procopius's overt bewilderment and, actually, acknowledgment of his inability to coherently interpret the episode in question also gives further credence to the argument that he objectively presented what he knew.

The most reasonable explanation of what happened should be sought in the field of military strategy and tactics. Predisposed to giving a resolute rebuff to the Byzantine army, numerically inferior

¹⁰³ Adonts concisely retold the Procopius's story about the relations between Sittas and the Bagratunis, without questioning its reliability (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, pp. 299-300).

Armenian rebel forces had to rely, first and foremost, on the use of unorthodox strategies. The Bagratunis' proposal, or their acceptance of Sittas's proposal, to reach separate accords and go over to the Byzantines was most probably jointly elaborated and fully agreed upon with the rebel command and had several possible objectives, namely: to gain time, to hold the enemy, to relax his vigilance, to regroup, to set him a trap and suddenly attack him, and finally to give an opportunity to the Armenian army to charge out of Sper and head towards Theodosiopolis (the latter point will be elaborated later in this study). A similar tactical ploy was earlier employed by the Armenians against the Persians. For example, at the end of the 370s *sparapet* Manuel Mamikonean, the *de facto* ruler of Armenia, held negotiations and made an agreement with the king of Persia, recognizing his hegemony, and with honors accepted into Armenia a 10,000 strong corps of Persian heavy cavalry under the command of Suren, a general from the famous martial House of Surena. Later, when the latter "with his army was peacefully camping, unworried, unsuspecting, and in naive tranquility," the Armenian army "suddenly and precipitously attacked Suren's corps and killed all of the ten thousand Persians."¹⁰⁴

In 539, however, such untraditional tactics of the Armenians did not fully work out. In a little while, the Byzantine military intelligence (or possibly the *kataskopoi* or the spies from what was then a rough equivalent for Byzantine foreign intelligence)¹⁰⁵ apparently had got the information about the true intentions of the Armenian command and informed Sittas of the deceptive game by the Bagratunis. Having learned that, Sittas immediately and without warning launched an offensive on Sper. His rage against the Bagratunis in part can be

104 Pavstos Buzand, *History of Armenia*, V, 38, pp. 373-376; cf. *The Epic Histories Attributed to Pawstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmutiwnk)*. Translation and commentary by Nina Garsoian (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 223.

105 On *kataskopoi* in 530-550s, see Lee, A.D. "Procopius, Justinian and the *Kataskopoi*," *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 39 (83), No. 2, 1989, pp. 569-572.

explained precisely by such a sequence of preceding events. What was successfully accomplished by Manuel Mamikonean in the fourth century and attempted, in cooperation with the Bagratunis, by his distant relative Vasak Mamikonean at the beginning of the military campaign in 539, is very much evocative of the following "recommendations" by Chinese ancient and medieval military treatises, in particular, Sun Bin's *The Art of War* (4th century BC), Tai Kung's *Six Secret Teachings* (4-3th centuries BC) and *Hu-ch'ien Ching* (compiled in 1004):

*[Against a numerous, strong and militant enemy] army, first spread the word that you dare not fight, that you are in no position to test your strength against him. By pretending that you are ready to yield to his power, you make the enemy drunk with pride. Thus he relaxes his vigilance and becomes fuzzy about your true intentions. Then catch him unprepared and unawares... This is the method of defeating a powerful enemy by deceptive means while expanding your own strength in the process.*¹⁰⁶

*When up against a powerful and tenacious enemy, appear to be weak and await your chance. When faced by the arrogant and imperious, appear to be respectful and find an opportunity to eliminate him.*¹⁰⁷
*Speak deferentially, listen respectfully, follow his command, and accord with him in everything. He will never imagine you might be in conflict with him. Our treacherous measures will then be settled.*¹⁰⁸

When you see the enemy's army approaching, retreat and concentrate behind defensive walls. When you see the enemy's emissaries approaching, speak deferentially and act dispirited, as if you hope to be reconciled with them. The masses will assume you are afraid. When

106 Sunzi: *The Art of War & Sun Bin: The Art of War*. Translated by Lin Wusun (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007), pp. 176-177.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

108 Sawyer, Ralph D. *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007), p. 56.

*utilizing fear you should withdraw and contract, establish ambushes, and then attack, employing unorthodox tactics to penetrate them. Act as if you want to be reconciled, move them with profits, and make them arrogant through your humility. This is the Tao for employing fear.*¹⁰⁹

Acting exactly like that, the Armenians were additionally attempting to psychologically affect the Byzantine commander-in-chief by transforming his strategic and tactical perception of the situation and in particular instilling in him overconfidence in his own forces and undue belief in an excessive weakness of the enemy. To this end the Armenians scored a real success: as will be seen below, Sittas indeed overestimated his strength and underestimated the capabilities of the rebels. One indirect outcome of the Armenians' deceptive stratagem was that Sittas had been infuriated and thus deranged to a degree that, in the end, it had deadly consequences for him and his mission. The negative impact of the element of anger on Sittas's rash decision-making, hinted by Procopius of Caesarea himself, has been properly noted by Whately, according to whom, however, the fact that "Sittas becomes run by his emotions... and loses his sense of reason" should be attributed to the "unexpected problem" of "a communication break down" between him and the Bagratunis.¹¹⁰ Whately's notion about "communication break down" as the main cause of this episode seems to be influenced by, or is at least highly reminiscent of, John Bury's erstwhile arbitrary interpretation. The latter alleged that the "letter-carrier, not knowing the exact position of the territory of the A[s]petiani, lost his way in the intricate Armenian highlands" and thus, in

109 Sawyer, Ralph D. *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 266; idem, *The Tao of Spycraft: Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China* (Colorado-Oxford: Westview Press, 2004), p. 209.

110 Whately, *Descriptions of Battle in the 'Wars' of Procopius*, pp. 167-168, 188-189.

effect, was the chief culprit upon whose sluggishness the confrontation between the Byzantines and the Bagratunis erupted.¹¹¹

Next, noting that the Bagratunis "being now possessed with anger, arrayed themselves for battle with all the rest," Procopius reports highly important particulars about the ensuing pitched battle:

*But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines.*¹¹²

These, at first glance, scant data are in fact fairly informative and allow the reviewing of the war tactics chosen by Vasak Mamikonean and Sittas. To progress with the analysis, at the very outset, the locale of the battle needs to be accurately identified. The historian Michael Chamchyan (1738-1823) was the first to correctly identify *Oenochalakon/Oinochalakon* with the famous medieval town and fortress of Avnik. Later, Adontz agreed with this identification, perhaps independently, because he did not provide a reference to Chamchyan's suggestion.¹¹³ However, neither Chamchyan, nor Adontz explicated

111 Here is Bury's interpretation in full: "A numerous tribe of the Armenians, called Apetiani, professed themselves ready to submit, if the safety of their property were guaranteed, and Sittas sent them a promise to that effect in writing. But unluckily the letter-carrier, not knowing the exact position of the territory of the Apetiani, lost his way in the intricate Armenian highlands; and while Sittas advanced with his troops to receive their submission, the Apetiani were ignorant that their proposal had been accepted, and looked with suspicion on the approaching army. Some of their number fell in by chance with Roman soldiers and were treated as enemies. Sittas, unaware that his communication had miscarried, was indignant that the promised submission was delayed; the Apetiani were put to the sword and their wives and children were slain in a cave" (see Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, p. 420). Likewise, Martindale holds "various accidents and misunderstandings" to be responsible for the opening of hostilities between the Bagratunis and Sittas (Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, p. 1162).

112 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.19.

113 Chamchyan, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 242; Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300.

the etymology of *Oenochalakon*, probably because they trusted that it had to be clear to all students of *Grabar* (the old or Classical Armenian): the word Avnik (Աւնիկ) was then pronounced also as Onik, while the second part of this toponym, “chalakon/kalakon,” is nothing else than the Armenian word “kalak” = city. Thus, *Oenochalakon* was Onik-Kalak/Onik-city, i.e. Avnik.¹¹⁴ Yet, this important identification by Chamchian-Adontz has been effectively ignored by later scholarship.¹¹⁵ Avnik was located in the canton of Basean (Basiane), Ayrarat province of Great Armenia,¹¹⁶ on the east bank of the Araks River, 60 kilometers in a straight line from Theodosiopolis, which from the beginning of the 530s became the residence of *strategos* (*magister*) of Armenia.¹¹⁷ At present, Avnik corresponds to the village of Güzelhisar

114 Alishan pointed out on pronunciation of Avnik as Onik as early as the 19th century (Ղ. Ալիշան, *Տեղագիր Հայոց Մեծաց* [Gh. Alishan, *Geographic Overview of the Great Armenia*], Venice, 1855, c. 56).

115 Հայ ժողովրդի պատմություն: Հ. II [Yeremyan, S. T. (ed.), *The History of Armenian People*. Vol. II], *op.cit.*, p. 249; Հայ ժողովրդի պատմության քրեատմատիա: Հ. 1 [Reader on the History of Armenian People, v. I. Compiled by Hovhanissyan P. and Abrahamyan A., Yerevan State University Press, 1981], pp. 659-661. The exception is the book by Iskanyan, where, however, Chamchian’s identification is curtly mentioned only in a footnote, while no observation is made that N. Adontz, the leading authority on this period of the Armenian history, was of the same opinion (Iskanyan, *Armenian-Byzantine Relations in IV-VII centuries*, p. 216, n. 2). H. Bartikyan correctly explained only the second part of this compound word – *kalak*, also overlooking the Chamchian-Adontz clarification (*Byzantine Sources*. Vol. I., pp. 81, 332, n. 12).

116 Գ. Ա. Հակոբյան, *Ներքին Բասենի ազգագրությունը և բանահյուսությունը* [Hakobyan, G. A. *The Ethnography and Folklore of Lower Basen*, Yerevan, 1974], p. 15. The historical evidence and studies about Avnik are presented in detail in Միխայիլ Յովհաննիսյան, *Հայաստանի բերդերը* [Michael Hovannisian, *The Fortresses of Armenia*, Venice, 1970], pp. 644-653. Avnik is incorrectly localized in canton Havnunik in *The Dictionary of Toponyms of Armenia and Neighboring Areas* [Հայաստանի և հարակից շրջանների տեղանունների բառարան] (vol. I, Yerevan, 1986, p. 365) as well as in two articles of *Soviet Armenian Encyclopedia* (Հայկական սովետական հանրագիտարան) (vol. 5, Yerevan, 1980, p. 270), yet correctly identified in canton Basean in the article «Avnik» of the same encyclopedia (vol. I, Yerevan, 1974, p. 622).

117 “Before that, Melitene, the capital of Lesser Armenia, had been the military center, since the Duke of Armenia had resided there” (Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 112; cf. Адонц, *Армения в эпоху Юстиниана*, c. 139).

and the eponymous castle of Avnik or Güzelhisar-Kalesi in the county (Turk. *ilche*) of Pasinler in the Erzurum province (Turk. *il*) of Turkey. The battle took place in the vicinities of Avnik, at an altitude of 2000-2100 meters, where the western branch of Dzhrabashkh (also known as Sukavet, now – Keosedakh) mountain range runs through.

Thus, at the time when the Byzantine army confronted the rebel army in 539, the encampment of the Armenian troops was no longer at Pharangium in Sper, as in the beginning of the rebellion, but a locality, which lay directly across the state border of the Empire – in Persarmenia. That Sittas after all issued an order to cross the border and thereby create, in this very stressful time for the Empire, an undesirable cause for the deterioration of relations with Persia, is implicative of several military-political realities.

First, this decision was most likely made in the heat of pursuing the Armenian forces who were retreating into the mountains (notably, when the pursuit of the Armenian rebels posed a military necessity, the Persians, too, did not shy away from crossing the Empire’s borders).¹¹⁸ Second, this precipitous border region could, if necessary, have been assumed to be a “no man’s land” between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia. Hence, in 539, when the peace between Eastern Roman Empire and Persia was still in force, the Byzantine army would have chosen the shortest possible route toward Avnik, which went from Theodosiopolis through Basean plain. Third, the Empire attached the utmost importance to the suppression of the Armenian rebellion, which was worth provoking hostilities with Persia. Only after the Armenian rebellion was quelled in late 539, did Justinian send an ambas-

118 For example, in 483, pursuing the Armenian force under *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonian, the Persian general Zarmir Hazaravulcht crossed the border and entered the canton of Shalagom (Shatgomk) of Upper Armenia, with the hope that on the Roman territory the Armenian rebels would already feel themselves safe and therefore would be caught by surprise (see Նուպար Փարպեցի, *Պատմություն Հայոց, քննական բնագիրը Գ. Տէր-Մկրտչեանի և Ստ. Մալխասեանցի* [Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Papi], *History of Armenia*. Yerevan State University, 1982, III. 78, c. 352-354).

sador to Khosrov I, trying to dissuade him from starting a war.¹¹⁹

It should also be taken into consideration that, especially after the signing of the Nvarsak treaty between the Armenian rebel forces and the Sassanids in 484, Persarmenia was almost fully exempt from garrisoning the Persian forces. Like in the Byzantine Empire before the 530s, the protection of the frontier was assigned to the local Armenian troops who in 539 would have hardly tried to ward off the retreat of Byzantine Armenian rebels into the territory under their control. On the contrary, it is quite possible that they joined their western kinsmen and mounted combined resistance to Sittas's army, later easily rationalizing such behavior to the Persians with their desire to protect the boundaries of the state.

There is no specific evidence about when exactly Vasak Mamikonean decided to move out the Armenian army from Sper to Theodosiopolis area, but it seems more likely that this strategic maneuver – the movement of his army from one theater to the other – was performed just before the onset of the Byzantine army's offensive. The possible objectives of this movement are clear: either to consolidate their grip on Theodosiopolis, the center of Byzantine political and military administration in Armenia (if it was under rebel control), or subject the city to the threat of attack (if it was still in the hands of the Byzantines). Besides, since Theodosiopolis area was bordering Persarmenia, the rebels retained the ability of avoiding the risk of encirclement and, if necessary, quickly retreating into Persarmenia. That is, Vasak Mamikonean chose to adopt a defensive strategy. At the same time, the broad maneuvering of the Armenian army from Sper to Theodosiopolis in itself is a testament to its strength and mobility, as well as a relative pointer to the areas under its military control.

The evolution of Byzantine-Armenian military campaign of 539 could be expounded if an acceptable explanation is provided to the

119 Proc. Bell. Pers., II.4.14-26.

two aforementioned events, namely: the skirmish of the Byzantine army with a small Armenian detachment of the Bagratunis and Sittas's massacring of the Bagratuni women and children in the cave. Both of these incidents physically could occur only in Sper, the fiefdom of the Bagratunis, where the initial camp of Armenian rebels was located in Pharangium. Therefore, Sittas's first strike was directed against Sper.¹²⁰ It should be assumed that the Byzantine army was moving along the road Bayberd-Vahanashen-Mlehi-Sper (see Map 1).¹²¹ Sittas temporarily divided his army and moved it in two different directions. This was probably done either in Sper, or on its approaches. Such separation of Byzantine forces would have aimed at cutting off the possible routes of the Bagratunis' retreat from Sper and their unification with the main body of the Armenian army under the command of Vasak Mamikonean who had earlier left for the Theodosiopolis area. The massacre committed by Sittas in a cave – where the Armenians usually hid to escape the enemy assaults on their fortresses and settlements – indicates furthermore a previous violent confrontation with the Armenian forces, possibly, the storming of an Armenian fortress that resulted in significant casualties for the Byzantines. This alone could have trig-

120 Adontz confuses the sequence of events: he synchronizes the cave massacre perpetrated by Sittas with the decisive battle between the Armenian and Byzantine armies and correspondingly localizes this cave near Avnik in the canton Basean (Adontz, *Historical Studies*, p. 300).

121 If Theodosiopolis was still in the hands of the Byzantines, and Sittas was there during his protracted negotiations with the rebels, his army's offensive on Sper was to pass through Theodosiopolis-Shalagom-Farangium line. However, this option that I have noted in the popular version of this study (see *Sobesednik Armenii (Russian version)/ Hayastani zratsakitz (Armenian version)* weekly, № 27 (190), July 15, 2011), now seems to me much less likely, because the movement of Vasak Mamikonean's army toward south, from Sper to Theodosiopolis (from where the rebels could reach Avnik), clearly suggests the pressure on the rebels from the western side and the absence of a large Byzantine force in Theodosiopolis. If Sittas were moving on Farangium from the south, Vasak had no reason to break through the Byzantine barriers and retreat into Persarmenia from Theodosiopolis area: he could cross the border from Sper itself toward Vkhik, as, most probably, the Bagratunis did later.

gered an inhuman cruelty by Sittas, who before that, it should not be forgotten, was at all costs avoiding further escalation of the enmity with the Armenians.

Accordingly, in its attempt to overtake and destroy Vasak Mamikonean's retreating forces, the Byzantine army was compelled to overcome pockets of resistance in Sper and made ground with considerable effort. The Bagratunis thus effectively played the role of the rebels' rearguard. In all likelihood, Vasak's true intention was to exhaust Sittas's troops as much as possible, to canalize them to the site where he had chosen to give a decisive battle, and, on the other hand, to conserve his own strength. As reported by Procopius, the Bagratunis' contingent joined the Armenian army later, just before the decisive battle.

In any case, it could be asserted with all certainty that in spite of all preventive measures taken by Sittas, he failed to prevent the rejoining of the Bagratunis' evidently crack troops with the main rebel body under Vasak's command. This, in the end, was fatal for the Byzantines. It is feasible that part of the Byzantine army stayed in Sper in order to consolidate the imperial control of this breakaway canton, thus weakening the advancing army of Sittas just before the decisive battle. Owing to Sittas's vigorous actions to block the Bagratunis in Sper and prevent them from rejoining Vasak, the safest and most likely route for the delayed withdrawal of Bagratunis' contingent from Sper could not have been through the staging of a direct breakout of the Byzantine cordons to Theodosiopolis and then to Avnik, but the crossing of the Persian border and movement through the territory of Persarmenia along the line Sper-Vkhik-Okale-Bolberd-Daroink (for the tentative route of the Bagratunis' retreat, *see* Map 1).

Here Procopius's previously cited report needs to be revisited again: "But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines." Waging a defensive campaign,

Vasak declined to confront the enemy on a more or less open field and ensured instead that the battle took place on rugged terrain, where the effective combat formations and organization of cooperation between the different branches of Byzantine troops were essentially reduced to naught, while the good knowledge of the terrain and combat qualities of the individual soldiers came to the fore. In connection with this battle, an insightful observation by Carl von Clausewitz seems to be relevant to quote: "The troops' national feeling (enthusiasm, fanatical zeal, faith, and general temper) is most apparent in mountain warfare where every man, down to the individual soldier, is on his own... Efficiency, skill, and the tempered courage that welds the body of troops into a single mold will have their greatest scope in operations in open country."¹²²

Noting that "the Romans usually chose an open and level terrain for their cavalry battles" and that in this particular engagement "the effect of the terrain on the battle formation is clear," I. Syvanne reasonably suggests that "the ridges and ravines forced both the Armenians and the Romans to adopt a scattered formation," which was "so unusual" as even to push Procopius of Caesarea to pay attention.¹²³ However, the outline of the whole military campaign of 539 provided above allows one to conclude that in the battle of *Oenochalakon* it was less the topography than a human factor, namely – *sparapet* Vasak Mamikonean who, making maximum use of the features of terrain, managed to fragment the Byzantine army to numerous small units, thereby disrupting or, to be more precise, preventing them to line up in their customary battle formations. Vasak's tactics was, in fact, precisely identical to Sun Bin's following recommendations: "Against an enemy superior in number, it is possible to divide it into pockets

122 Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*, eds./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 218.

123 Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, pp. 440, 441 (note 1).

so that they are unable to help each other."¹²⁴ On another occasion, Sun Bin again advises to make a "numerous, strong, fierce, flexible and persistent" enemy "scatter his forces."¹²⁵

Next, Procopius of Caesarea describes the climax of the battle:

So it happened that some few of the Armenians and Sittas with not many of his followers came close upon each other, with only a ravine lying between them. Both parties were horsemen. Then Sittas with a few men following him crossed the ravine and advanced against the enemy; the Armenians, after withdrawing to the rear, stopped, and Sittas pursued no further but remained where he was. Suddenly someone from the Roman army, an Erulian by birth,¹²⁶ who had been pursuing the enemy, returning impetuously from them came up to Sittas and his men. Now as it happened Sittas had planted his spear in the ground; and the Erulian's horse fell upon this with a great rush and shattered it. And the general was exceedingly annoyed by this, and one of the Armenians, seeing him, recognized him and declared to all the others that it was Sittas. For it happened that he had no helmet on his head. Thus it did not escape the enemy that he had come there with only a few men. Sittas, then, upon hearing the Armenian say this, since his spear, as has been said, lay broken in two on the ground, drew his sword and attempted immediately to recross the ravine. But the enemy advanced upon him with great eagerness, and a soldier overtaking him in the ravine struck him a glancing blow with his sword on the top of his head; and he took off the whole scalp, but the steel did not injure the bone at all. And Sittas continued to press forward still more than before, but Artabanes, son of John of the Arsacidæ, fell upon him

124 Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*, op.cit., pp. 182-183.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

126 The Heruli were a Germanic tribe.

from behind and with a thrust of his spear killed him. Thus Sittas was removed from the world after no notable fashion, in a manner unworthy of his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy, a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries. But some say that Sittas did not die at the hand of Artabanes, but that Solomon, a very insignificant man among the Armenians, destroyed him."¹²⁷

It is hard to believe, however, that the Armenians recognized Sittas accidentally, in the heat of battle and, as asserted by Procopius, by his facial features. The Byzantine commander-in-chief could have been recognized through much larger signs and symbols, including the battle standard of *strategos*, personal military regalia, commander's magnificent gear, etc. Neither was it accidental that in front of Sittas's unit – undoubtedly the best one in his army – a no less crack detachment of Artabanes Arshakuni happened to be standing. In all probability, the task to intercept and destroy Sittas was conceived by Vasak Mamikonean in the very beginning of the battle and Artabanes, who was already known for his daring and extraordinary military skills, was entrusted to carry it out. Artabanes and his detachment of elite commandos won this standalone battle both tactically, brilliantly combining their retreat with the surprise counterattack, and in terms of individual combat training, in mounted duels against legionnaires and Sittas, himself an experienced and brave soldier.¹²⁸

127 Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.19-27. The fact that both Acacius and Sittas were killed by Artabanes was once more pointed out by Procopius – via one of the heroes, Gregorius – in his *Vandalic War*: "For when you were still young, you slew Acacius, the ruler of the Armenians, and Sittas, the general of the Romans, and as a result of this becoming known to the king Chosroes, you campaigned with him against the Romans" (Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, II.27.17).

128 Whately mentions that the Armenians actually encircled Sittas (Whately, *Descriptions of Battle in the 'Wars' of Procopius*, p. 195).

Thus, during the ensuing separate battles which were fought in gorges and ravines cut off from one another, the Armenian forces ultimately emerged victorious. It is true that the fate of the battle at Avnik was much influenced by the outcome of the combat between the units of Sittas and Artabanus. At the same time, based on the highly unusual

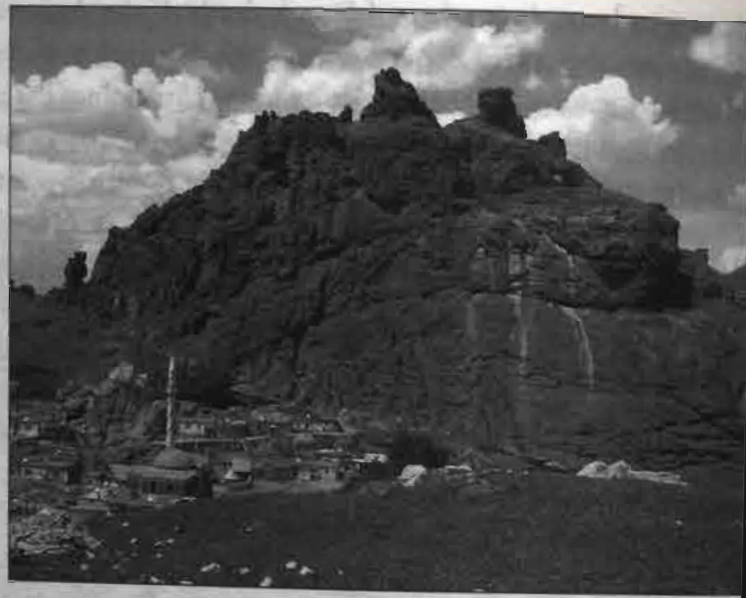


Map 2. Approximate site of the decisive battle between Byzantine and Armenian armies in 539. The vicinities of the town of Avnik in Persarmenia (mod. Güzelhisar, Turkey) (satellite photograph).

character of this battle, the death of Sittas could not have played as large a role in the final defeat of his army, as if it happened in an open field and in front of all. Because of the fragmentation of military units, the lack of reliable communication between them and isolated character of separate battles, the majority of both Byzantine and Ar-

menian troops learned very late of Sittas's death. If the Armenians would have lost the rest of the encounters, the destruction of Sittas would not have ensured for them a victory in the battle, since the post of the fallen commander-in-chief, no doubt, was immediately taken up by his deputy commander, as it was common in Roman/Byzantine army (as well as, incidentally, among the Armenian troops). Consequently, the battle had been won not only thanks to the defeat of Sittas's detachment, but in the whole – as a result of victories in most of the numerous combats with the rest of the Byzantine army units.¹²⁹ More than half of all the separate combats that took place during that day were won by the Armenians, who in addition succeeded in killing the Byzantine commander-in-chief – this is how a most accurate winning formula of the Avnik battle could be presented. The victory, of course, was made possible by the detailed study and smart use of the terrain by the Armenian command, including the preliminary preparation to the conduct of defensive-offensive battle through the proper pre-positioning of military units as well as possibly the construction of some fortifications and the selection of hidden places for ambushes and reserves. Sittas had neither the time nor the opportunity for similar or equivalent preparations, since as soon as he set his foot on the theater of war selected by Vasak Mamikonean, his troops were attacked by the Armenian army, which moved out of the defensive posture and initiated numerous meeting engagements. Both competent segmentation of forces, “one of the fundamental enabling

¹²⁹ Without any analysis or deduction Chamchyan, nonetheless, in a single sentence makes a generally correct conclusion about the course of the battle after the murder of Sittas: “And the other Armenian soldiers, each gaining the upper hand over his opponent, put them to flight” (Chamchyan, *History of Armenia*, v. II, p. 242). That Sittas “was killed in a skirmish” (Hughes, *Belisarius*, pp. 246-247) could be considered technically correct, only if one accepts that this skirmish happened during and within the framework of a decisive battle, which Hughes, regrettably, did not notice. Meanwhile, carelessly defining this battle as a “casual skirmish,” as does Browning, without providing any supporting arguments (Browning, *Justinian and Theodora*, p. 76) is totally misplaced, as has been amply demonstrated throughout the present study.



The fortress of Avnik, Persarmenia (currently also known as Güzelhisar-Kalesi, Turkey).

techniques of unorthodox warfare¹³⁰ in antiquity, and their efficient maneuvering were employed by the Armenian *sparapet* to a maximum effect.

Thus, Vasak Mamikonean surpassed the acknowledged military talent of Sittas Ursicius, both in planning and conduct of the entire military campaign, especially by imposing upon his foe the decisive battle on advantageous and prearranged terrain, as well as in operational tactics, particularly the efficient control and employment of his forces during this unique battle, which has yet to take its rightful place in the history of war tactics of the early Byzantine period. "The commander's talents are given greatest scope in rough hilly country."¹³¹ This apt comment by Clausewitz could be fully attributed to Vasak Mamikonean, the outstanding commander-in-chief of the Armenian

130 Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception*, pp. 88, 193.

131 Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*, p. 218.

rebel army in 538-539 who has been unfairly consigned to oblivion. Further, the victory in this battle once again proves the validity of a modern military historian's assessment that in 4-7th centuries "the Armenians were well in step with the military developments occurring around them."¹³²



The fortress of Avnik.

132. Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, p. 414. Some other tactical elements employed by the Armenian troops and their mastery of various weapons are discussed in: Hakobyan, "The Roman-Eastern Contacts in the Field of Military Tactics," *Yerevan University Journal*, pp. 49-70.

4.

A comparative analysis of the Mamikonean tactics in the battles of Akori and Avnik (481 AD and 539 AD)

A historical-comparative deviation should be introduced here to shed additional light on the tactical particularities of the battle of Avnik. This battle bears some striking resemblances to the famous battle of Akori in 481, when the Armenian rebel force of 300 horsemen under the command of another Mamikonean (again Vasak!)¹³³ routed the 7000-strong Persian punitive army.

133 Though Ghazar Parbetzi does not exactly specify the commander-in-chief of the Armenian contingent, he provides the names of the commanders and deputy commanders of the center and the right-flank units as well as the name of the commander of the left-flank unit. Their overall commander was undoubtedly either Babgen Suny or Vasak Mamikonean, whom Ghazar identified as the commander and deputy commander of the center unit, mentioning them always ahead of other officers, in clear sign of superior position over the others. It is, however, not clear who of these two was the number one in seniority: while describing the battle, in one instance Ghazar gives Babgen Suny's name first and Vasak Mamikonean's name second only to reverse this order in another instance (Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Parpi], *History of Armenia*, III.68, 69, pp. 300-303). In any case, even if Vasak Mamikonean was put in charge of the deputy commander of the Armenian contingent, his total contribution to the Armenian victory at Akori, well presented by Ghazar Parbetzi, could be considered as similar to that of the commander-in-chief. In some studies, the command of Armenian troops at the battle of Akori is incorrectly attributed to *sparapet* Vahan Mamikonean, the overall leader of the Armenian revolt in 481-484 (see *History of the Armenian people*, Vol. II, ed. by S. T. Yeremyan, *op.cit.*, p. 200; Մ. Վ. Սարգսյան, Հայ բազմական արվեստի պատմությունից [S. V. Sargsyan, *From the History of the Armenian Art of War*], Yerevan, 1969, pp. 203-204). In fact, the commander-in-chief at Akori was the latter's brother, *sepuh* (=middle rank officer) Vasak Mamikonean.

In this earlier battle the Armenians also lured the enemy into the mountainous terrain (at the foothills of the Great Ararat), then near the village of Akori, at an altitude of 1700 meters above sea-level, swiftly counterattacked against them and, in the course of fighting, killed Atrvshnasp, the commander-in-chief of this Persian force, who was also the *marzpan* (governor) of Armenia. Thus, the efficient tactics adopted by both Vasak Mamikoneans in these battles partook of three elements: 1) a retreat into rugged terrain followed by the transition to a counteroffensive, 2) an initiation of combat in the highlands, 3) the premeditated targeting of enemy commanders in the field.



The ruins of the medieval walls of Avnik.

An important difference between these two highland battles was that, unlike at Avnik, where the Armenian troops adopted scattered formation and were divided into numerous smaller units, at Akori they acted like a single fist. Thanks to the concentration of force at the proper time and at the proper place, the 300 Armenian riders managed to crush the three enemy groupings that had lost contact from each other by an ill-conceived Persian planning. First, the Armenians undertook a well-timed counterattack and overran the elite part of the Persian cavalry (or *Savaran*),¹³⁴ which imprudently charged forward and became separated from its own lines. Then the devastating concentrated strike was directed against – as the reconnaissance conducted personally by Vasak had determined earlier – the poorly trained main body of the Persians. Finally, the Armenians attacked and dispersed the third enemy military grouping, an ethnic mix which consisted mainly of the regiment of the Katish, a belligerent tribe allied to the Persians, and one hundred Armenian riders of *malkhaz*¹³⁵ Gardzhuyl Khorkhoruni, who switched sides and went over to the Persians early in the battle. This unit came into the rear of the main Armenian force, and in this third and last combat the commander of the Katish was killed too.¹³⁶

The century of Gardzhuyl Khorkhoruni, which was making up the left flank of the Armenian force, unnoticeably went over to the Persians just before the start of the very first combat, namely before the collision of the center and right flank of the Armenian troops with the elite part of the Persian cavalry, headed by *marzpan* Atrvshnasp himself.¹³⁷ The

134 On the origins, weapons, deployment and tactics of *Savaran*, see Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, *op. cit.*

135 *Malkhaz* was a hereditary title given to the former commanders of the royal body-guard corps of the Armenian kings, and, at the same time, an alternative surname of the princely family that occupied that office, namely, the Khorkhoruni (Moses Khorenatzi, *History of Armenia*, II.7.).

136 Ghazar Parpetzi [Lazar of Parpi], *History of Armenia*, III.68-69, pp. 294-305.

137 *Ibid.*, III.69, pp. 300-301.

treacherous desertion to the Persians of the Gardzhuyl's unit had not been immediately noticed by the 300 Armenian horsemen who were in the meantime rushing to the attack, because in this period, according to the accepted rules of the Sassanid – and Armenian, as can be inferred from this particular case – military tactics the role of the left wing was primarily in defense, rather than in attack. On this subject, the aforementioned Sassanid military treatise *Ayeen-Nameh* stated: "As for the left wing, it will not attack unless it is attacked by a perilous enemy, in which case they (i.e., the warriors of the left wing – A.A.) repulse an enemy attack. While the warriors of the right wing and the 'two main parts'¹³⁸ can engage in battle with those who are advancing upon them and return to their main force in order to re-enter [the combat], the warriors of the left wing can [do that] only during a retreat, and they can not come back and re-enter [the combat]..."¹³⁹ (As explained by a modern researcher, "the main reason why the left flank was not favored for the attack was because using a shield on the left generally did not allow for the heavy infantryman to attack efficiently to the left. As a result of this perceived weakness, the left flank was actually given stronger forces as well as left-handed archers. Left-handed bowmen were viewed as being equally capable of effectively shooting from both left and right sides").¹⁴⁰ During the attack and further pursuit of the Persians, the Armenian force of 300 advanced a long way forward, believing all the time that Gardzhuyl's century was providing the security of its rear. In the meantime, however, Gardzhuyl joined with the Katish regiment, which secretly approached him from either the left or the rear. Having their forces united, Gardzhuyl and the leader of Katish, not knowing about the defeat of the main body of the Persians and the death of Atrvshnasp, attempted to strike at the

138 "The main line and the reinforcement formed the center and was known as the 'two main parts' or the 'heart'" (see Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, p. 29).

139 К. А. Иностранцев, *Сасанидские этюды*, с. 47.

140 Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*, p. 30.

300 strong Armenian force from the rear. It is clear that this third Persian grouping reached the rear of the Armenian troops after the defeat of the main Persian force, which implies that the Katish regiment, certainly having an advance secret agreement, arrived at the left flank of the Armenians and joined Gardzhuyk Khorkhoruni's century belatedly. This lateness, in turn, indicates that the first two combats were won at a blazing speed. Thus, poor coordination and wrong timing of the Persian attack against the rear of the Armenian force had a serious impact on the outcome of this battle.

According to Ghazar Parpetzi, the fifth century Armenian historian, during the last combat, after the tactical reconnaissance undertaken by Hrahat Kamsarakan, only he and his brother Nerseh (not to be confused with the aforementioned Kamsarakan brothers of the same name, alias Aratius and Narses, who were victorious against Belisarius and Sittas in 527) rushed to the attack "with a very small number of men." However, it seems self-evident that the bulk of the Armenian 300 strong force also participated in this final attack in the second tier, because in other directions the enemy had simply vanished!

Special attention should be given to the third common tactical element successfully employed by the Armenians in the battles of Akori and Avnik, namely the killing of the enemy commanders. The high efficiency of such an asymmetric blow to an enemy army has been no secret to the command of large and small armed organizations throughout history.¹⁴¹ That is why the challenge has always been its execution, rather than its acknowledgment, or even preliminary planning. According to the available historical evidence, the Armenians were repeatedly successful in killing enemy commanders-in-chief. Thus, Pavstos Buzand reports a whole series of such triumphs: 21 killings of Persian commanders-in-chief (mentioned by their names of

141 See, for example, Sun Bin's advice on targeting killings of enemy commanders (Sunzi: *The Art of War* & Sun Bin: *The Art of War*, p. 175).

feudal posts) in 21 consecutive victorious battles.¹⁴² Even if inflated and exaggerated, this account clearly implies how much emphasis the Armenian military's top brass was putting on this specific stratagem. The implementation of such a sophisticated mission during the ongoing fighting required, in particular, an availability of credible and preliminary intelligence, a timely placement of a mobile and elite squad against the enemy commander who was typically protected by at least his own elite squad of bodyguards – and a lightning surgical strike. At both Akori and Avnik the Armenian troops fulfilled all these tasks. What is more, at Akori the leader of the Katish who is characterized as "a mighty and brave warrior" – and prior to that, possibly, the commander of the Persian army Atrvshnasp – were hit at the outset of the respective clashes, during the very first contact. In general, the battle of Akori is a brilliant illustration of the well-known principle of the ancient Chinese military theory, according to which "one [elite] unit can attack ten [poorly trained enemy] units, invariably causing them to be helpless."¹⁴³

The facts that both of these battles were guided by Mamikonean generals and that important tactical elements of the first one, after 58 years, were applied during the second one – of course, with modifications arising from different military and historical circumstances – quite naturally suggests that the ancestral house of the legendary Armenian *sparapets* maintained a first-class school of warfare, which solicitously developed valuable military experiences and best martial

142 Pavstos Buzand, IV, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 (Gumand Shapuh, the Persian commander-in-chief, was killed "in the first instance"), 32, 33, 34, 35, 36 (Suren, the Persian commander-in-chief, was taken prisoner and later executed), 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48 (the killing of the Persian commander-in-chief is implied by the alleged destruction of the entire Persian contingent), 49.

143 Sawyer, Ralph D., *The Essence of War: Leadership and Strategy from the Chinese Military Classics* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), pp. 228-229; idem, *The Tao of Spycraft*, p. 440.

traditions and passed them from generation to generation.¹⁴⁴ Obviously, the tactical resourcefulness of the medieval Armenian armed forces owed much to the Mamikoneans' art of war.



A military scene from a fourteenth-century Armenian manuscript (see Traina in Bibliography).

144 I have raised this issue on another occasion, concluding, inter alia, that "to ensure stability and continuity of the highly sophisticated system of Armenian armed forces (in particular, a smooth and painless generational change in its commanding personnel), it had been necessary and even inevitable to conduct training and transfer of the Armenian military tradition, not only verbally but also in writing" (Ա. Այվազյան, Հայաստանի պատմության լուսարևոտը ամերիկյան պատմագրության մեջ: Քննական տեսություն [A. Ayvazian, *The History of Armenia as Presented in American Historiography: A Critical Survey*], Yerevan, 1998, p. 172).

5.

The end of the rebellion and its aftermath

The Armenian victory at Avnik did not, however, put an end to the hostilities. Procopius of Caesarea, our sole primary source on the rebellion of 538-539, reports nothing about the total number of casualties suffered by the Byzantine army during the battle of Avnik, but the gravity of its defeat can be deduced from the fact that Justinian was compelled to dispatch to Armenia yet another of his battle-hardened commanders – Bouzes,¹⁴⁵ ostensibly at the head of large reinforcements or even a newly formed army. It is clear that following the Byzantine army's defeat in a decisive battle, its remains retreated, and the rebels established their control over the Byzantine part of Armenia or, at least, Inner Armenia. The Armenians, most likely, again concentrated their forces in the strategically advantageous areas of Sper and Theodosiopolis. According to Procopius,

145 On Bouzes's military career, see Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: V. III*, pp. 254-257. Bouzes had, in particular, been the commander of the left flank of the Belisarius's army at the famous battle of Dara in 530 (see Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, I.13). Later in 540, a year after the suppression of the Armenian rebellion, Justinian divided the command of the *magistri militum per Orientem* between Belisarius and Bouzes (Buzes): "The emperor had divided into two parts the military command of the East, leaving the portion as far as the River Euphrates under the control of Belisarius who formerly held the command of the whole, while the portion from there as far as the Persian boundary he entrusted to Bouzes, commanding him to take charge of the whole territory of the East until Belisarius should return from Italy" (Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.6.1).

this is how the rebellion concluded:

After the death of Sittas the emperor commanded Bouzes to go against the Armenians; and he, upon drawing near, sent to them promising to effect a reconciliation between the emperor and all the Armenians, and asking that some of their notables should come to confer with him on these matters. Now the Armenians as a whole were unable to trust Bouzes nor were they willing to receive his proposals. But there was a certain man of the Arsacidae who was especially friendly with him, John by name, the father of Artabanes, and this man, trusting in Bouzes as his friend came to him with his son-in-law, Bassaces, and a few others; but when these men had reached the spot where they were to meet Bouzes on the following day, and had made their bivouac there, they perceived that they had come into a place surrounded by the Roman army. Bassaces, the son-in-law, therefore earnestly entreated John to fly. And since he was not able to persuade him, he left him there alone, and in company with all the others eluded the Romans, and went back again by the same road. And Bouzes found John alone and slew him; and since after this the Armenians had no hope of ever reaching an agreement with the Romans, and since they were unable to prevail over the emperor in war, they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man.¹⁴⁶

At this the Armenian rebellion of 538-539 came to an end, but it had an important extension: the Armenian commanders and their troops who passed into Persia partook in the war against the Byzantine Empire which was initiated, not least upon their encouragement, by the Persian king Khosrov I in May 540.¹⁴⁷ It is important to under-

¹⁴⁶ Proc. Bell. Pers., II.3.28-31.

¹⁴⁷ Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, pp. 102-103, 269 (n. 6).

stand the motivations and interest of leaders of the Armenian rebellion in this new Byzantine-Sassanid war. It would be justified to think that Vasak Mamikonean, Artavan Arshakuni and their companions, as well as a substantial part of Armenian secular and spiritual elite were hoping that, as a result of this war, the Byzantine part of Armenia will be joined to Persarmenia, thus, effectively, the reunification of the eastern and western parts of Armenia would take place, even if only within Persia. If this scenario were to succeed, the rather high degree of internal autonomy of Persarmenia (where, unlike in Byzantine Armenia, Armenian feudal inheritance rights were not violated) would have increased even more, thereby creating promising opportunities for national development and the future liberation struggle for independence. However, such reunification was destined to come true only after two centuries and under the auspices of the Arab Caliphate rather than Sassanid Persia, the latter having been obliterated from the historical scene by the former.

The first two years of Byzantine-Sassanid war that started in 540 were waged in Mesopotamia and Lazica, rather than in Armenia proper. Having witnessed the impracticability of their hopes and disappointed in the Persian policy toward Armenia, the leaders of 538-539 rebellion, after "receiving pledges from the Romans" changed sides again. They were led again by Vasak, who in this context is once more mentioned as their head ("they... came with Vasak to Byzantium"), as well as Artabanes and his brother John (Hovannes) Arshakunis.¹⁴⁸ It

¹⁴⁸ As Procopius reticently informs, "the Armenians who had gone over to Khusro received pledges from the Romans and came with Vasak to Byzantium" (Proc. Bell. Pers., II.21.34). In another of his books, Procopius affirms that Artabanes defected to the Byzantines along with other Armenians who had previously went over to Persia: "And he sent with him... some few Armenians led by Artabanes and John, sons of John, of the line of the Arsacidae, who had recently left the Persian army and as deserters had come back to the Romans, together with the other Armenians." (Proc. Bell. Vand., IV.24.2; cf. Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, p. 273 (n. 7).

happened in 542.¹⁴⁹ Artabanes, as has been said above, quickly rose up the bureaucratic ladder of the imperial court, and already from there, in collaboration with at least one of the other notable Armenians, once tried to somehow affect on the fate of Armenia by taking part in a failed assassination attempt on Emperor Justinian.

The sociopolitical and purely military repercussions of this rebellion may be regarded as ambiguous. On one hand, after its suppression Justinian and his successors on the throne largely succeeded in administratively Byzantinizing the western part of Armenia, especially by destroying the Armenian nobility's age-old privileges in their homeland and co-opting many of its sturdy representatives into the ranks of the metropolitan aristocracy (in particular, the emperor Heraclius (610-641) could have indeed been the great-great grandson of John Arshakuni).¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the Armenian rebellion of 538-539 undoubtedly was of great significance for the preservation of national sentiment in Byzantine Armenia, which because of religious affinity with the Empire was heavily exposed to its assimilation policy. This rebellion was followed by new liberation attempts by the Armenians in both Persarmenia, where in 571 another powerful revolt broke out, and in Byzantine Armenia in 589, 591, and 601.¹⁵¹ In spite of all countermeasures taken by the major powers of the time – the Eastern

149 Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630*, pp. 116, 273 (n. 7).

150 Toumanoff, C., *The Heraclids and the Arsacids*, pp. 431-434. For a brief overview of primary sources and research on the Armenian origin of Heraclius, see Kaegi, Walter E., *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 21-22, esp. n. 4.

151 Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII Centuries)*, pp. 49-56; cf. *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Translated, with notes, by R. W. Thomson. Historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston. Assistance from Tim Greenwood. Part I (Liverpool Univ. Press, 1999), pp. XX-XXI; Soutanian, Gabriel. *The History of Bishop Sebeos: Redefining a Seventh-Century Voice from Armenia* (London: Bennet & Bloom, 2007), p. 45.

Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia,¹⁵² the Armenian armed forces continued to maintain an exceptional level of professional skill and combat effectiveness (and in Persarmenia – their organizational and command structure as well), regularly demonstrating them in subsequent military vicissitudes and, in the long run, effectively retaining the opportunity for Armenia to restore its full independence, if as late as 885.¹⁵³

152 In some historical periods, these anti-Armenian actions by the Persian and Byzantine rulers had a clear-cut goal of emptying Armenia of its armed forces, while during the reign of Maurice were mutually planned and coordinated (Part II of the present study deals with this topic in detail).

153 I. Syvanne is not wrong to note that “the Armenians were well in step with the military developments occurring around them, but the smallness of their nation and the internal divisions ensured that they were unable to acquire full independence” (Syvanne, *The Age of Hippoxotai*, p. 414). However, the latter part of this conception needs to be clarified further: first, during the centuries in question the total number of Armenians, compared with the neighboring peoples, was definitely not small, but large; second, the intervals when the Armenians lacked independence should not be inadvertently projected on all times and ages, because both before and after the early Byzantine period the Armenians were able to establish, lastingly maintain and then restore their independence in Armenia as well as later in the 11-14th centuries in Cilicia.

Appendix A

The assassination operation against Gontharis, Carthage, May 546

(Excerpts from Procopius of Caesaria's *The Vandalic War*)

Artabanes, upon receiving pledges, went up to the palace with his Armenians, and promised to serve the tyrant according to his orders. But secretly he was purposing to destroy Gontharis, having previously communicated this purpose to Gregorius, his nephew, and to Artasires, his body-guard. And Gregorius, urging him on to the undertaking, spoke as follows:

«Artabanes, the opportunity is now at hand for you, and you alone, to win the glory of Belisarius — nay more, even to surpass that glory by far. For he came here, having received from the emperor a most formidable army and great sums of money, having officers accompanying him and advisers in great numbers, and a fleet of ships whose like we have never before heard tell of, and numerous cavalry, and arms, and everything else, to put it in a word, prepared for him in a manner worthy of the Roman empire. And thus equipped he won back Libya for the Romans with much toil. But all these achievements have so completely come to naught, that they are, at this moment, as if they had never been — except indeed, that there is at present left to the Romans from

the victory of Belisarius the losses they have suffered in lives and in money, and, in addition, that they are no longer able even to guard the good things they won. But the winning back of all these things for the emperor now depends upon the courage and judgment and right hand of you alone. Therefore consider that you are of the house of the Arsacidae by ancient descent, and remember that it is seemly for men of noble birth to play the part of brave men always and in all places. Now many remarkable deeds have been performed by you in behalf of freedom. For when you were still young, you slew Acacius, the ruler of the Armenians, and Sittas, the general of the Romans, and as a result of this becoming known to the king Chosroes, you campaigned with him against the Romans. And since you have reached so great a station that it devolves upon you not to allow the Roman power to lie subject to a drunken dog, show at this time that it was by reason of noble birth and a valorous heart that at the former time, good sir, you performed those deeds; and I as well as Artasires here will assist you in everything, so far as we have the power, in accordance with your commands.»

So spoke Gregorius; and he excited the mind of Artabanes still more against the tyrant.

Proc. Bell. Vand. II.27.9-19

But after long deliberation it seemed to him better to put Gontharis out of the world and thus free both the emperor and Libya from a difficult situation.

Proc. Bell. Vand. II.27.34

Gontharis decided to entertain his friends at a banquet... Artabanes, accordingly, when he was bidden to this banquet, thinking that this occasion furnished him a suitable opportunity for the murder of the tyrant, was planning to carry out his purpose. He therefore dis-

closed the matter to Gregorius and to Artasires and three other bodyguards, bidding the bodyguards get inside the hall with their swords (for when commanders are entertained at a banquet it is customary for their bodyguards to stand behind them), and after getting inside to make an attack suddenly, at whatever moment should seem to them most suitable; and Artasires was to strike the first blow. At the same time he directed Gregorius to pick out a large number of the most daring of the Armenians and bring them to the palace, carrying only their swords in their hands (for it is not lawful for the escort of officers in a city to be armed with anything else), and leaving these men in the vestibule, to come inside with the body-guards; and he was to tell the plan to no one of them, but to make only this explanation, that he was suspicious of Gontharis, fearing that he had called Artabanes to this banquet to do him harm, and therefore wished that they should stand beside the soldiers of Gontharis who had been stationed there on guard, and giving the appearance of indulging in some play, they were to take hold of the shields which these guards carried, and waving them about and otherwise moving them keep constantly turning them up and down; and if any tumult or shouting took place within, they were to take up these very shields and come to the rescue on the run. Such were the orders which Artabanes gave, and Gregorius proceeded to put them into execution.

And Artasires devised the following plan: he cut some arrows into two parts and placed them on the wrist of his left arm, the sections reaching to his elbow. And after binding them very carefully with straps, he laid over them the sleeve of his tunic. And he did this in order that, if anyone should raise his sword over him and attempt to strike him, he might avoid the chance of suffering serious injury; for he had only to thrust his left arm in front of him, and the steel would break off as it crashed upon the wood, and thus his body could not be reached at any point.

With such purpose, then, Artasires did as I have said. And to Artabanes he spoke as follows: "As for me, I have hopes that I shall prove equal to the undertaking and shall not hesitate, and also that I shall touch the body of Gontharis with this sword; but as for what will follow, I am unable to say whether God in His anger against the tyrant will co-operate with me in this daring deed, or whether, avenging some sin of mine, He will stand against me there and be an obstacle in my way. If, therefore, you see that the tyrant is not wounded in a vital spot, do you kill me with my sword without the least hesitation, so that I may not be tortured by him into saying that it was by your will that I rushed into the undertaking, and thus not only perish myself most shamefully, but also be compelled against my will to destroy you as well." And after Artasires had spoken such words he too, together with Gregorius and one of the bodyguards, entered the room where the couches were and took his stand behind Artabanes. And the rest, remaining by the guards, did as they had been commanded.

So Artasires, when the banquet had only just begun, was purposing to set to work, and he was already touching the hilt of his sword. But Gregorius prevented him by saying in the Armenian tongue that Gontharis was still wholly himself, not having as yet drunk any great quantity of wine. Then Artasires groaned and said: "My good fellow, how fine a heart I have for the deed, and now you have for the moment wrongfully hindered me!" And as the drinking went on, Gontharis, who by now was thoroughly saturated with wine, began to give portions of the food to the body-guards, yielding to a generous mood. And they, upon receiving these portions, went outside the building immediately and were about to eat them, leaving beside Gontharis only three body-guards, one of whom happened to be Ulitheus. And Artasires also started to go out in order to taste the morsels with the rest. But just then a kind of fear came over him lest, when he should wish to draw his sword, something might prevent him. Accordingly, as

soon as he got outside, he secretly threw away the sheath of the sword, and taking it naked under his arm, hidden by his cloak, he rushed in to Gontharis, as if to say something without the knowledge of the others... And Artasires, having come close to the tyrant, was pushed by one of the servants, and as he retreated a little to the rear, the servant observed that his sword was bared and cried out saying: "What is this, my excellent fellow?" And Gontharis, putting his hand to his right ear, and turning his face, looked at him. And Artasires struck him with his sword as he did so, and cut off a piece of his scalp together with his fingers. ...And Artabanes, seeing Gontharis leaping to his feet (for he reclined close to him), drew a two-edged dagger which hung by his thigh — a rather large one — and thrusting it into the tyrant's left side clean up to the hilt, left it there. And the tyrant none the less tried to leap up, but having received a mortal wound, he fell where he was. Ulitheus then brought his sword down upon Artasires as if to strike him over the head; but he held his left arm above his head, and thus profited by his own idea in the moment of greatest need. For since Ulitheus' sword had its edge turned when it struck the sections of arrows on his arm, he himself was unscathed, and he killed Ulitheus with no difficulty. And Peter and Artabanes, the one seizing the sword of Gontharis and the other that of Ulitheus who had fallen, killed on the spot those of the body-guards who remained. Thus there arose, as was natural, an exceedingly great tumult and confusion. And when this was perceived by those of the Armenians who were standing by the tyrant's guards, they immediately picked up the shields according to the plan which had been arranged with them, and went on the run to the banquet-room. And they slew all the Vandals and the friends of Gontharis, no one resisting... And Artabanes won great fame for himself from this deed among all men... and the emperor appointed him general of all Libya.

Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.28. 1; 5-43

Appendix B

The Armenian Rebellion, 538-539 AD

(Excerpts from Procopius of Caesaria's *The Persian War*)

... This Amazaspes, as time went on, was denounced to the Emperor Justinian by one of his friends, Acacius by name, on the ground that he was abusing the Armenians and wished to give over to the Persians Theodosiopolis and certain other fortresses. After telling this, Acacius, by the emperor's will, slew Amazaspes treacherously, and himself secured the command over the Armenians by the gift of the emperor. And being base by nature, he gained the opportunity of displaying his inward character, and he proved to be the most cruel of all men toward his subjects. For he plundered their property without excuse and ordained that they should pay an unheard-of tax of four centenaria.

But the Armenians, unable to bear him any longer, conspired together and slew Acacius and fled for refuge to Phrangium. Therefore the emperor sent Sittas against them from Byzantium. For Sittas had been delaying there since the time when the treaty was made with the Persians. So he came to Armenia, but at first he entered upon the war reluctantly and exerted himself to calm the people and to restore the population to their former habitations, promising to persuade the emperor to remit to them the payment of the new tax. But since the emperor kept assailing him with frequent reproaches for his hesita-

tion, led on by the slanders of Adolius, the son of Acacius, Sittas at last made his preparations for the conflict. First of all he attempted by means of promises of many good things to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and to attach them to his cause, in order that the task of overpowering the others might be attended with less difficulty and toil. And the tribe called the Aspetiani, great in power and in numbers, was willing to join him. And they went to Sittas and begged him to give them pledges in writing that, if they abandoned their kinsmen in the battle and came to the Roman army, they should remain entirely free from harm, retaining their own possessions. Now Sittas was delighted and wrote to them in tablets, giving them pledges just as they desired of him; he then sealed the writing and sent it to them. Then, confident that by their help he would be victorious in the war without fighting, he went with his whole army to a place called Oenochalakon, where the Armenians had their camp. But by some chance those who carried the tablets went by another road and did not succeed at all in meeting the Aspetiani. Moreover a portion of the Roman army happened upon some few of them, and not knowing the agreement which had been made, treated them as enemies. And Sittas himself caught some of their women and children in a cave and slew them, either because he did not understand what had happened or because he was angry with the Aspetiani for not joining him as had been agreed.

But they, being now possessed with anger, arrayed themselves for battle with all the rest. But since both armies were on exceedingly difficult ground where precipices abounded, they did not fight in one place, but scattered about among the ridges and ravines. So it happened that some few of the Armenians and Sittas with not many of his followers came close upon each other, with only a ravine lying between them. Both parties were horsemen. Then Sittas with a few men following him crossed the ravine and advanced against the enemy; the

Armenians, after withdrawing to the rear, stopped, and Sittas pursued no further but remained where he was. Suddenly someone from the Roman army, an Erulian by birth, who had been pursuing the enemy, returning impetuously from them came up to Sittas and his men. Now as it happened Sittas had planted his spear in the ground; and the Erulian's horse fell upon this with a great rush and shattered it. And the general was exceedingly annoyed by this, and one of the Armenians, seeing him, recognized him and declared to all the others that it was Sittas. For it happened that he had no helmet on his head. Thus it did not escape the enemy that he had come there with only a few men. Sittas, then, upon hearing the Armenian say this, since his spear, as has been said, lay broken in two on the ground, drew his sword and attempted immediately to recross the ravine. But the enemy advanced upon him with great eagerness, and a soldier overtaking him in the ravine struck him a glancing blow with his sword on the top of his head; and he took off the whole scalp, but the steel did not injure the bone at all. And Sittas continued to press forward still more than before, but Artabanes, son of John of the Arsacidae, fell upon him from behind and with a thrust of his spear killed him. Thus Sittas was removed from the world after no notable fashion, in a manner unworthy of his valour and his continual achievements against the enemy, a man who was extremely handsome in appearance and a capable warrior, and a general second to none of his contemporaries. But some say that Sittas did not die at the hand of Artabanes, but that Solomon, a very insignificant man among the Armenians, destroyed him.

After the death of Sittas the emperor commanded Bouzes to go against the Armenians; and he, upon drawing near, sent to them promising to effect a reconciliation between the emperor and all the Armenians, and asking that some of their notables should come to confer with him on these matters.

Now the Armenians as a whole were unable to trust Bouzes nor

were they willing to receive his proposals. But there was a certain man of the Arsacidae who was especially friendly with him, John by name, the father of Artabanes, and this man, trusting in Bouzes as his friend came to him with his son-in-law, Bassaces, and a few others; but when these men had reached the spot where they were to meet Bouzes on the following day, and had made their bivouac there, they perceived that they had come into a place surrounded by the Roman army. Bassaces, the son-in-law, therefore earnestly entreated John to fly. And since he was not able to persuade him, he left him there alone, and in company with all the others eluded the Romans, and went back again by the same road. And Bouzes found John alone and slew him; and since after this the Armenians had no hope of ever reaching an agreement with the Romans, and since they were unable to prevail over the emperor in war, they came before the Persian king led by Bassaces, an energetic man.

Proc. *Bell. Pers.*, II.3.4-31

PART II.

On Imperial Prejudice and Expedient Omission of Armenians in Maurice's *Strategikon*



A military scene from a fourteenth-century Armenian manuscript (see Traina in Bibliography).

The historical factors that forge the imperial prejudice against recalcitrant nations should be of current interest not only to historians, but to specialists in international relations concerned with the global rise of ethnopolitical conflicts. This question addresses a number of enduring predicaments of public administration, including the extent to which the political decision-making can be affected by prejudice, the effectiveness of state propaganda and concealment of real objectives pursued, the ratio of hard and soft means of quelling the resistance of the defiant ethnic groups. In this regard, a wealth of material is provided by the history of one and a half millennia relationships of Roman and Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empires with the Armenian people both during the time of existence of independent kingdoms in Armenia proper (from the earliest times to 428 AD and later in 885-1046) and Armenian state in Cilicia (1080-1375), as well as in the intervals between them.

The problem of the various images of the Armenians in Byzantium has already become the subject of numerous, if sketchy, historical investigations and remarks.¹⁵⁴ As a rule, students of this subject have focused on the images of those Armenians who resided beyond Armenia proper in the Byzantine capital and peripheral provinces as

¹⁵⁴ For an excellent, though unfortunately short, essay, see Vryonis, Speros Jr., "Byzantine Images of the Armenians," in R. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Image in History and Literature* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981), pp. 65-81; cf. Каждан, А. П. *Армяне в составе господствующего класса византийской империи в XI-XII вв.* (Ереван, 1975), с. 140-141; Garsoian, Nina G. "The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire," in Hélène Ahrweiler, Angeliki E. Laiou, eds., *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), pp. 66-67; Айвазян, *The Code of Honor of the Armenian Military, 4-5th centuries*, pp. 25-26, 40-41 (notes 52, 54).

either newly-arrived immigrants or old-established inhabitants. Consequently, the shaping of Armenian images in the Byzantine Empire was appropriately sought and analyzed in such spheres as ecclesiastical differences between Armenian and Greek Churches, the ethnic peculiarities of everyday life as well as the rivalry in the imperial court between the Armenians and Greeks, the two major ethnic groupings of Byzantine elite.¹⁵⁵ In contrast, this essay aims to analyze the Byzantine images of the Armenians of Armenia, that is, those who continued to live in and exercise military, political, economical and religious authority over their homeland.¹⁵⁶ Accordingly, the following analysis, using primarily the historical evidence pertaining to the period of Emperor Maurice's rule (582-602), focuses on the previously uncharted geopolitical – in fact, fundamental – determinant in the construction of anti-Armenian images in the imperial strata of Byzantine society. Additionally, the continuity of these images with the analogous Roman tradition of prejudice towards the Armenian people is being traced.

155 As underlined by Jenkins, "By the tenth century of our era the Byzantine governing class had discarded its original west Roman element and its early Germanic affinities. The Slav element, though numerically strong, had scarcely intruded itself into the higher ranks of society; and where it had done so, was regarded with dislike and contempt by the two strong strains from which those ranks were mainly recruited, the Greek and the Armenian. The former of these was prominent in the bureaucracy and in the more conservative wing of the church. But the military might, the military organization and the military genius of Byzantium, the sure, strong base on which the whole glittering superstructure stood, was Armenian through and through" (Jenkins, R. J. H. *The Byzantine Empire on the Eve of the Crusades* (London: The Historical Association, 1953, p. 11). However, a crucial reservation should be made here: much of ethnically Armenian elite in the Byzantine Empire in religious and cultural terms was almost entirely Hellenized and certainly put imperial interests above the interests of Armenia, while retaining its connection with the Armenian nation only nominally, by and large for receiving a career support from their rich and powerful compatriots as well as getting authorization of their real or alleged noble origins from Armenian princely or even royal (Arcacid/Arshakuni) blood.

156 Vryonis was the first one to point out that, while analyzing the Byzantine images of the Armenians, "one must differentiate between Armenians who lived in Armenia and those who lived in Byzantium, and between Armenians who were Chalcedonian and those who were Gregorian" (Vryonis, *Byzantine Images of the Armenians*, p. 65).

The *Strategikon*, an influential manual of Byzantine military strategy attributed to Emperor Maurice (582-602), includes a separate chapter on, in the words of the author, "the tactics and characteristics of each race which may cause trouble to our state."¹⁵⁷ The section deals specifically with "the Persians," "the Scythians, that is, Avars, Turks¹⁵⁸ and others," "the light-haired peoples, such as the Franks, Lombards, and others like them," "the Slavs, the Antes, and the like."

Maurice's basic approach to these hostiles is down-to-earth military, often even highly complimentary about their particular martial traits. In spite of this pragmatism, however, all of these ethnically different peoples receive, to a greater or lesser degree, their dose of imperial prejudice, which itself was a necessary element for indoctrination of troops. Thus, the Persians, the old arch-enemy, are described as "wicked, dissembling, and servile";¹⁵⁹ the Avars as "scoundrels, devils..., treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate desire for riches..., very fickle, avaricious...";¹⁶⁰ the Franks and Lombards as "disobedient to their leaders," "easily corrupted by money, greedy

157 *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (The Middle Ages Series). Translated by George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp. 113-126.

158 Under the Turks, the *Strategikon* describes the Turkic nomads that then roamed north and north-east of the Black Sea, including possibly the Magyars (*Maurice's Strategikon*, *op. cit.*, p. 116, note 3, referring to Wiita, John. *The Ethnika in Byzantine Military Treatises*. Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1977, p. 122; cf. Mark Bartusis, "A review of the *Taktika* of Leo VI," <http://www.medieval-warfare.com>, *Medieval Warfare Blog*, Jun 08, 2011). Two centuries later, in the *Taktika* by the Emperor Leo VI (886-912), the Turks refer mainly to the Magyars and possibly other tribes dwelling north of the Euxine, while the Scythians is used as a general term for all nomads including the Turkic tribes and Bulgars (the latter are mentioned separately as well)) (George T. Dennis (ed.), *The Taktika of Leo VI*. *Dumbarton Oaks Texts* 12. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010, XVIII.43,73; cf. Маврикий. *Тактика и стратегия*. Пер. с лат. М. А. Цыбашева. СПб., 1903, прим. 218; Sheldon, R.M. *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003, p. 155).

159 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

160 *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118.

as they are";¹⁶¹ the Slavs as "always at odds with each other," having "ill feeling toward one another," "no regard for treaties," and hence "completely faithless."¹⁶² This last reproach sounds especially hollow and cynical, because just a couple of pages earlier Maurice is advising his commanders to only "pretend to come to agreements" with the enemy.¹⁶³ In fact, these biases represented an essential element of state propaganda and indoctrination of imperial troops, that is, they had partly been brought about by the same military pragmatism.

In this depiction of hostile and troublesome peoples, the *Strategikon* conspicuously omits the Armenians, who had on many occasions fought the Byzantine troops either on their own or, more often, as allies or vassals of Persia.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, in the course of the sixth century there were several uprisings in Armenian lands under the Empire's control. The rebellion of 538-539 stands out as perhaps the most prominent, when the Armenians assembled an army and took control of most of Byzantine Armenia. The Byzantine army sent by Justinian against them suffered a humiliating defeat in a decisive battle fought in the rugged terrain, where their commander-in-chief, Sittas, one of Justinian's most prominent generals on a par with Belisarius, was killed as well (see above, Part I).

During Maurice's own reign, three Armenian insurrections took place circa 589, 591 and 601.¹⁶⁵ Although they did not result in major

161 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

162 *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

163 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

164 It should be reminded once again that in 387 Armenia was divided between the Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia. Armenia's broader eastern part fell under the control of the Persians, where the Kingdom of Great Armenia lasted until 428 AD. While in the western part of Armenia that fell under Romano-Byzantine Empire, the Armenian kingdom was abolished almost immediately – in 390.

165 See Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church (VI-VII Centuries)*, *op.cit.*, pp. 49-56; cf. *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Transl. by R. W. Thomson, *op.cit.*, p. XX-XXI; Gabriel Soutanian, *The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 45.

hostilities and prolonged bloodshed, but yet again revealed the high probability of armed conflict with the Armenian resistance, as well as high combat readiness of the Armenian armed forces. As aptly noted by the military historian I. Syvanne, after the murder of Maurice in 602 "the poor relationship between the Romans and Armenians [during the latter's reign] backfired when the Persians could use as their puppet the (supposed) son of Maurice:" in particular, "one of the Armenian born generals betrayed his army to the invading Persians."¹⁶⁶

The absence of the Armenians from Maurice's list of hostile forces is all the more remarkable because contemporary Armenian primary sources have recorded verbatim his extremely negative attitude towards the Armenians. Maurice's critical depiction of the Armenians has been preserved in the seventh-century *History of Bishop Sebeos*. According to Sebeos, Maurice, in a special message to the Persian king and his ally Khosrov (Chosroes) II Parviz (590-628) proposed a conspiracy to destroy Armenia's armed forces by removing its military class, that is the Armenian nobility and their troops, from Armenia and resettling them in remote areas of Byzantium and Persia. According to Sebeos, here is the essence of what Maurice himself said in his message to the Persian king:

'A self-willed and recalcitrant nation lives between us and causes trouble.¹⁶⁷ Now come: I shall mobilize mine [the Armenian princes and their troops] and send them to Thrace, while you would mobilize yours and send them to the East. If they perish, our enemies would perish; if they kill, they would kill our enemies, and we shall live in peace. For, if they remain in their country, we shall have no rest.'

166 Syvanne, *The Age of Hippotaxotai*, p. 414, note 5.

167 Incidentally, the thesis about the recalcitrance of the Armenians was later reiterated by the Arabs, who mentioned the Armenian prisoners as "the worst among the white slaves." See Мей, А. *Мусульманский Ренессанс* [The Muslim Renaissance] (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), pp. 138, 140-141.

*Then both [kings] have made an agreement [on the proposed policies].*¹⁶⁸

Sebeos identifies this proposal as “the perfidious plot by Maurice to empty Armenia of Armenian princes.”¹⁶⁹ He also accentuates the bigoted character of Maurice’s accusations, calling his message to the Persian king “the letter of vilifications about all the princes of Armenia and their troops.”¹⁷⁰

Byzantine and Persian policies towards Armenian nobility were carried out exactly in terms of Maurice’s message to Khosrov II and

168 «Ազգ մի խոտոր եւ անհնազանդ են, ասէ, կան ի միջի մերում եւ պղտորեն: Բայց է կ, ասէ, եւ զիմս ժողովեմ եւ ի Քրակէ դումարեմ. եւ դու զքոյդ ժողովէ եւ հրամայէ յԱրեւելս տանել: Զի եթէ մեռանին՝ թշնամիք մեռանին. եւ եթէ սպանանեն՝ զթշնամիս սպանանեն. եւ մեք կեցցուք խաղաղութեամբ: Զի եթէ դոքա յերկրի իւրեանց լինիցին՝ մեզ հանգչել ոչ լինի»: Միաբանեցան երկրքին»: - Սեբեոսի եպիսկոպոսի Պատմություն [The History of Bishop Sebeos] (Yerevan, 1979), p. 86; cf. S. Malkhasyantz’ publication of the same *History* (Yerevan, 1939), p. 49. Translation into English is mine. There are a few differences from previous translations, including the translation of the word ժողովել as mobilize rather than *gather*, which makes clear Maurice’s intention of gathering the troops rather than the Armenian civilian. In addition, it should be noted that in old Armenian the verb «ժողովել», if used in the military context, has the relevant connotation and specifically means mobilization activities. For other translations of this passage into English, see Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 161; Charanis, Peter. *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire* (Lisboa: Livraria Bertrand, 1963), pp. 14-15; *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

169 «նենգաւոր խորհուրդ Մարկայ՝ թափուր լիշխանաց Հալոց կացուցանել զՀայս» (*The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 86).

170 «զիր ամբաստանութեան վասն իշխանացն ամենայն Հայաստանեայց եւ զաւրաց իրեանց» (*The History of Bishop Sebeos*, p. 86). R. Thomson translated this passage as “a letter of accusation... concerning all the Armenian princes and their troops” (*The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, *op.cit.*, p. 31; earlier “a letter of accusation” was suggested by N. Garsoian, see Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 166). There are two problems with this translation. First, the Armenian word *զիր ամբաստանութեան (ամբաստանագիր)* has also the well-known meaning of “libel,” which corresponds much more adequately to this case. Second, Maurice’s letter was specifically about the Armenian princes who were residing in Armenia proper and the Armenian original clearly uses the expression “of Armenia” (*Հայաստանեայց*). The translation offered in this paper does also correspond to the historical context, because there were many Armenian commanders of princely status and origin in Byzantine military service, whom Maurice clearly did not have in mind, when writing his notorious letter in question.

correctly identified by both their contemporaries as well as modern historians as aimed at weakening Armenia and undermining its military establishment.¹⁷¹ The factual, if not textual, authenticity of Maurice’s letter, including its strategic prescriptions, can thus be considered as historical reality. The content of this letter or the letter itself could have been passed to the Armenian leaders (and through them to Sebeos) by no one else than the same King Khosrov II, who, after the murder of Maurice, immediately initiated a new war against the Byzantine Empire. Khosrov needed the support of the Armenians and this letter would have served as an incriminating evidence against the anti-Armenian intentions of Byzantium.

Further, Maurice’s letter falls within an earlier Roman pattern of representing the Armenians as a historically defiant element against both Roman and Parthian/(later) Persian superpowers. Precisely the same leitmotif about the Armenian image resonates in the following comment by Publius (Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–ca AD 120):

Armenia... from the earliest period, has owned a national character and a geographical situation of equal ambiguity, since with a wide extent of frontier conterminous with our own provinces, it stretches inland right up to Media; so that the Armenians lie interposed between two vast empires, with which, as they detest Rome and vie with the

171 Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, pp. 159-161. Grousset R., *Histoire de l’Arménie*. Paris, 1947, p. 258. E. Danielyan identifies these policies as “the Maurice doctrine” (Danielyan, *Political History of Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-56). Recently, J. Howard-Johnston has advanced a revisionist interpretation of how “the recruiting process... worked to the Armenians’ advantage” and, concurrently, rejected Sebeos’ assessment of Byzantine and Persian empires’ real intentions about Armenia (see *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, pp. XX-XXI). These assumptions, however, are absolutely not convincing and, in fact, contradict the available historical evidence. The Byzantine policies of keeping their section of Armenia “under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes”, removing the Armenians out of their country and scattering them “to every corner of the Roman empire” had been recognized by non-Armenian sources even before Maurice’s more forceful policies to the same effect (see above, notes 18-19).

Parthian, they are too frequently at variance.

*[[Armenia] Ambigua gens ea antiquitus hominum ingeniis et situ terrarum, quoniam nostris provinciis late praetenta penitus ad Medos porrigitur; maximisque imperiis interiecti et saepius discordes sunt, adversus Romanus odio et in Parthum invidia.]*¹⁷²

Tacitus rages against the Armenians on other occasions as well, claiming them to be notoriously “treacherous,” “ignorant of liberty,” and that their “allegiance was a matter of doubt.”¹⁷³ In connection

172 Jackson translated the collocation of “in Parthum invidia” as “envy the Parthian” (Tacitus, *The Histories* (with an English translation by Clifford Moore); *Annales* (with an English translation by John Jackson). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann LTD, 1969 (first printed in 1931), II. 56, pp. 472, 474). However, it should be translated as “jealous of Parthia” or “vie with the Parthian.” Such translation is more accurate in terms of historical context (BC I c.-AD I c.) as well as the existing semantic option. Both the English translation of *Annals* by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb and French translation by Bunouf more adequately offer the word *jealousy/jalousie* for *invidia*: “...Armenia. This had been of old an unsettled country from the character of its people and from its geographical position, bordering, as it does, to a great extent on our provinces and stretching far away to Media. It lies between two most mighty empires, and is very often at strife with them, *hating Rome and jealous of Parthia*” (Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005, p. 51); “...en Arménie. De tout temps la foi de ce royaume fut douteuse, à cause du caractère des habitants et de la situation du pays, qui borde une grande étendue de nos provinces, et de l’autre côté s’enfoncé jusqu’aux Mèdes. Placés entre deux grands empires, les Arméniens sont presque toujours en querelle, *avec les Romains par haine, par jalousie avec les Parthes*” (Tacite, *Œuvres Complètes*. Traduites en Français avec une introduction et des notes par J. L. Bunouf. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1878, p. 79). Another acceptable translation of this interesting passage is provided by Woodman: “They [Armenians] have been an ambiguous race from ancient times, both in the instincts of the people and in their country’s situation, since, extending a broad frontier along our provinces, they stretch deep into the Medes: they are interposed between, and more often disaffected toward, these greatest of empires, with hatred for the Romans and resentment of the Parthian” (Tacitus, *The Annals*, transl., with introduction and notes, by A. J. Woodman. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, pp. 68-69). For an analysis of the translations (including those into Russian and modern Armenian) of this passage, see Ayzvazyan, *The Cornerstones of Armenian Identity*, *op.cit.*, pp. 107-110.

173 Tacitus, *Annales*, XII.46.4; XIII. 34.5, 35.1.

with some of these expressions, Rose Mary Sheldon, an American researcher of secret operations of ancient Rome (apropos, Professor of History and Colonel simultaneously) rightly observes that the Romans “in their public propaganda prided themselves on being open, aboveboard and honest... The official stated Roman attitude on covert action was that they did not employ such methods, and they remained masters at presenting themselves as straightforward and opposed to anything underhanded. It was always the foreigners, such as the Armenians and Carthaginians, who were portrayed as untrustworthy.”¹⁷⁴ The Romans, notes Sheldon, “loved accusing easterners of sneakiness,”¹⁷⁵ while “in reality, they were experts at public manipulation, spying and dirty tricks.”¹⁷⁶

The same twofold anti-Iranian and anti-Byzantine attitudes of the independence-oriented Armenians are implicitly validated by the renowned *sparapet* of the Armenian army Vasak Mamikonian, who in 368 AD after being invited, with the Armenian King Arshak II, to a friendly meeting and then treacherously captured by the Persian King Shapuh II (309-379), spoke to him as follows (quoted from the fifth-century *History of Armenia* by Pavstos Buzand):

...[While free] I was a giant, one of my feet rested on one mountain, the other on another mountain. When I was leaning on my right foot, I pushed the right mountain into the earth, and when I was leaning on my left foot, I pushed the left mountain into the earth... One of those two mountains was you, and the other – the King of the Greeks [i.e. the Roman Emperor]...¹⁷⁷

174 Sheldon, Rose Mary. “The Ancient Imperative: Clandestine Operations and Covert Action,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 299, 309.

175 Sheldon, Rose Mary. *Rome’s Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (Portland, Or.: Valantine Mitchell, 2010), p. 67.

176 Sheldon, “The Ancient Imperative,” p. 309.

177 [Ես սկայ էի. մի ոտնս ի միոյ լեռին կայր, եւ միւս ոտնս իմ ի միոյ լեռին կայր:

Notably, both Tacitus' and Emperor Maurice's judgments were uttered during periods of combined policies conducted by Iranian and Roman/Byzantine Empires aimed at partition and occupation of Armenia. In this context, the anti-Persian and anti-Roman/Byzantine attitudes of the Armenians are fully understandable. What they in fact superbly exemplify – vis-à-vis a full-fledged ethnonational consolidation of the Armenians in the historical periods under examination – is the important cross-cultural correlation of the frustration-aggression-displacement theory, known as “the more ingroup coordination and discipline, the more outgroup hostility.”¹⁷⁸

On the basis of some other Greek historical evidence drawn from religious-confessional and everyday spheres of interaction between the Armenians and Greeks in Constantinople, Speros Vryonis concludes that there was a tradition of anti-Armenian prejudice among the Greeks at least from the fourth century AD and through the fourteenth century AD.¹⁷⁹ Analyzing the primary sources, he writes that the relevant “texts indicate the existence – one does not know how widespread – of a particular, violently hostile perception of the Armenians, a perception that in the first instance does not seem to be grounded on religious differences, a perception particularly repugnant as it seems to exhale what today we call racism.”¹⁸⁰ Vryonis adds that in the Byzantine society “Byzantines of Armenian origin are ethnically identified as to origin more frequently than are Byzantines of any other origin.”¹⁸¹

Յորժամ յաջ ոտնս յենուի, զաչ լեառն ընդ գետին տանէի, որժամ ի ձախ ոտնս յենուի, զձախ լեառն ընդ գետին տանէի... [Երինքն երկուք, մի դու էիր, եւ մի՛ թագաւորն Յունաց:] Pávstos Buzand, *Hayotz Patmutiun* [History of Armenia], Tiflis, 1912, Book IV, Chapter 54.

178 See Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior* (U.S.A.-Canada: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972), pp. 124-125.

179 Vryonis, “Byzantine Images of the Armenians,” pp. 68-69.

180 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

181 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Speaking about the organization of the Armenian communities in the empire in 9-12th centuries, Alexander Kazhdan pointed out that the Armenians “were close-knit and detached; formed special units in the army; lived, in all likelihood, in their own neighborhoods in the cities; and acted together during street riots. Ethnic distinctiveness of Byzantine Armenians was supported by their religious distinctiveness... For this distinctiveness in religious and everyday life the Byzantine population responded the Armenians with enmity.”¹⁸²

A rare example of biased attitude towards Armenian soldiers, specifically the sentries, was recorded in a tenth century treatise, though, as noted by Edward Luttwak, the Armenians were “more commonly praised for their valor in Byzantine military texts.”¹⁸³

Some ethnic traits of the early medieval Armenians who lived in their homeland were pithily captured by Walter E. Kaegi, a prominent historian of Byzantine Empire. He observes, in particular, the Armenians’ “impulse to local autonomy,” their “will to remain distinctively Armenian,” that “in no other region of the Byzantine Empire... did the local inhabitants have a tradition of being so well armed and prone to rely on themselves and their own family groupings and notables,” and that both the Arabs and the Byzantines had to take into consideration the “intractability and formidable character of the Armenians.”¹⁸⁴

The historical evidence cited above definitely suggest that the Armenians were fully qualified to be included in the *Strategikon*'s list of

182 Каждан, А. П. *Армяне в составе господствующего класса византийской империи в XI-XII вв.*, с. 140-141.

183 The author of *De Velitatione Bellica Nicephori Augusti* argues that, though monthly rotations, a regular salary, and monthly allowances are all recommended, “Armenians carry out sentry duty rather poorly and carelessly... these men are not very likely to perform the sentry duty very well, for, after all, they are still Armenians” (see Luttwak, Edward N. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 341-342).

184 See Kaegi, Walter E. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 189, 198, 202, cf. a separate chapter on “Byzantium, Armenia, Armenians, and early Islamic conquests,” *ibid.*, pp. 181-204.

troublesome nations and their omission was certainly not a coincidence but, most probably, a matter of expedience. The question of why they are absent from this list has never been posed before.¹⁸⁵ Raising it can lead us to several important conclusions and suppositions. Below is a list of possible answers.

1. Maurice's own Armenian origin, which has been a subject of contention,¹⁸⁶ if true, could have prevented him from openly portraying the Armenians as a hostile people and, thus, attacking indirectly his own reputation.

2. The same motive should have been strengthened by the fact that the Armenians already constituted part of the Byzantine military and political elite: many Byzantine dignitaries and field commanders were of Armenian origin. As noted by Charanis, "Procopius mentions by name no less than seventeen Armenian commanders, including, of course, the great Narses."¹⁸⁷ Although, as the same author points out,

185 Regarding the Armenian historiography specifically, to the best of my knowledge, it is completely ignored the *Strategikon*, in part, obviously, because Armenia and the Armenians are absent from its text, and not least because there had been no professional Armenian military historians.

186 On possible Armenian origin of Maurice and critique of this opinion, see Adontz, N. "Les légendes de Maurice et de Constantin V, empereurs de Byzance," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales*, 2. Brussels, 1934, pp. 1-12; Coubert, P. *Byzance avant l'Islam*, I, Paris, 1951, pp. 34-41; Меликсет-бек, Л. М. Из истории армяно-византийских отношений («Маврикиевы легенды» в памятниках культуры древней Армении) // *Византийский временник*. 1961. Т. 20, с. 64-74. The latter study presents in detail the medieval legends, preserved in the *Histories* of the Armenian authors of the 11-13th centuries, Stepanos Asoghik (Taronetzi), Anonymous narrator (Pseudo Shapuh Bagratuni), Kirakos of Gandzak, as well as historians of the later period, according to whom Maurice was a native of Armenia, allegedly from the village of Oshakan or Taron or from Ani. The so-called "Maurice's column", a unique basaltic monument of the seventh century, still partially survives in Oshakan, where, a local tradition holds it as a gravestone of Emperor Maurice's mother. Cf. also Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 14; *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 522-523; Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 64.

187 Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 16.

the Armenian element in the Byzantine military was prominent in the armies of Justinian and Tiberius, "the situation changed in the course of the reign of Maurice, chiefly as a result of the Avaro-Slavic incursions into the Balkan peninsula. These incursions virtually eliminated Illyricum as a source of recruits and reduced the possibilities of Thrace. They cut communications with the West and made recruitments there most difficult. The empire, as a consequence, had to turn elsewhere for its troops. It turned to the regions of Caucasus and Armenia. In the armies of Maurice, we still find some Huns and also some Lombards. We find Bulgars too. *But the Armenian is the element which dominates* (the emphasis is mine – A.A.)."¹⁸⁸

For the success of his deliberate policies of resettling the Armenians into restless frontier regions of the Empire, mostly the Balkans and especially Thrace, Maurice was purposefully wooing the Armenian military. Nicolle notes that "of far greater military importance to Byzantium were the Armenians, who had a high military reputation from the 3rd to 8th centuries. ...All [Armenian cavalrymen]... were notably well equipped, Armenia being rich in iron. In fact Armenian armour was regarded as singularly heavy, while iron horse armour was more common than elsewhere." That is why "in the late 6th century Emperor Maurice cultivated these [Armenian] *nakharars*."¹⁸⁹ Therefore, it would have been totally inappropriate to present them as a threat in a major tactics field manual for the officers, many of whom were Armenians.

In such historical context one should reassess why Maurice's predecessor, the Emperor Justinian was lenient in his treatment of former Armenian rebel leaders to the point of dangerously exposing his own security and even after the discovery of an assassination plot against

188 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

189 Nicolle, *Romano-Byzantine armies 4th-9th centuries*, pp. 33-34.

himself, he did not severely punish one of them, Artabanes Arshacid.¹⁹⁰ Toumanoff explains this overindulgence with an Arshakuni Armenian general, who previously fought against his armies, with “something like a *parvenu’s* awe before the royal birth.”¹⁹¹ However, Justinian’s “incredible clemency” (as defined by Toumanoff) could be much better explained and was clearly stemming from the same desire to make utmost use of the Armenian military, on whose loyalty and skills he heavily relied. Eventually, this policy was paying off, as in the cases of Artabanes, Narses and a great number of other talented generals of Armenian descent.¹⁹²

3. In 591 Maurice imposed upon the Byzantine part of Armenian clergy the Empire’s dominant Chalcedonite Christian doctrine. Again, the purpose was not a brutal suppression of Armenians, but their smooth Hellenization. Their portrayal as a hostile people would have harmed his ecclesiastical initiative as well.

4. The omission of the Armenians from *the Strategikon’s* list of hostile peoples could serve as further evidence in support of dating the composition of this military manual during Maurice’s rule from 582 to 602.¹⁹³ If considered from the perspective of this particular omission only, a more plausible time frame would have been after Persian

190 Proc. *Bell. Goth.*, III.31-32.

191 Toumanoff, “Introduction to Christian Caucasian History: II: States and Dynasties of the Formative Period,” p. 47 (n. 219).

192 Incidentally, this attitude to formerly seditious, but gifted military commanders has had its analogues in world history. To recall only one case, in 1700 King William III ordered John Churchill, 1st duke of Marlborough – just a few years after being accused of treason and coup attempts – to represent the king in The Hague as Ambassador-Extraordinary and as commander of English forces on the continent.

193 In the context of the findings of the present study, the hypothesis by John Wiita that the *Strategikon* was authored by Philippicus, general and brother-in-law of Maurice, between 603-615 (see *Maurice’s Strategikon*, p. XVII), looks even less credible. For the debate on the issue of dating and authorship of *Strategikon*, which came, in principle, to the convincing conclusion about its compilation by the Emperor Maurice, see Кучма, В. В. *Военная организация византийской империи*, СПб, “Алетейя”, 2001, с. 39-43, 154-159; cf. *Maurice’s Strategikon*, pp. XVI-XVII.

King Khosrov II ceded parts of eastern Armenia to Maurice in 591, effectively making the Byzantine Empire the ruler of the larger part of Armenia and simultaneously turning the majority of the Armenians into the subjects of the Empire. After this, their open representation as a hostile people would have become nearly impossible.

Thus, Byzantine imperial prejudice against the Armenians, having been deliberately concealed and censored on the grounds of political and military expediency, did stay fully in place and provided ideological underpinning for the Empire’s colonialist policies toward Armenia. However, as it has been demonstrated above, all this did not prevent the Armenians from correctly comprehending Maurice’s conspiracy aimed at undermining Armenia’s own military potential. Accordingly, many Armenians defined Maurice as a hostile monarch and his Empire as fundamentally inimical.



“Maurice’s Column” in Oshakan, Armenia (7th century). See p. 108, n. 186.

Photo: A. Ayvazyan

Conclusion

The main reason for the one and a half millennia long Roman and Byzantine imperial prejudice against Armenia as a political entity and the Armenians as a nation was, evidently, the latter's desire for independence and autonomy and the concomitant rejection of political and religious authority of the empire. Almost all through their coexistence with the Empire the Armenians possessed in their homeland, and in the 11-14th centuries in Cilicia, a significant potential for organizing resistance, including (1) *the demographic factor* – the vast majority of the population of Armenia in the period under review was Armenian, (2) *a powerful military capacity*, which was wholly undermined only in the 14-15th centuries by the Mongol and Turkic invaders, (3) *the national religious organization* that was pagan up to 301 AD, and since then was represented by the Armenian Church with its own doctrine, language, ritual and even attire, (4) *the original and diversified culture*, especially the founding of national literature and education in Armenian language as early as the fifth century.

Neither the co-opting of a part of the Armenian nobility into the senior decision-making circles of Byzantium, nor the outwardly welcoming imperial propaganda, were able to neutralize the effects of real policies of the Empire, firmly aimed at Hellenization of Armenia. Ultimately, this led to the mirror image of the imperial bias – a consistently negative perception of Byzantium in wide circles of the Armenian people.

Although the historical theme of "Armenia against Rome and Byzantium" is a conspicuous example of an unusually prolonged confrontation and resistance (and periodically cooperation) between the Empire and its neighboring people, future comparative studies in this field could serve to identify some similarities and patterns in the state propaganda and the *realpolitik* of the ancient and medieval empires as well as the great powers of new and modern times.



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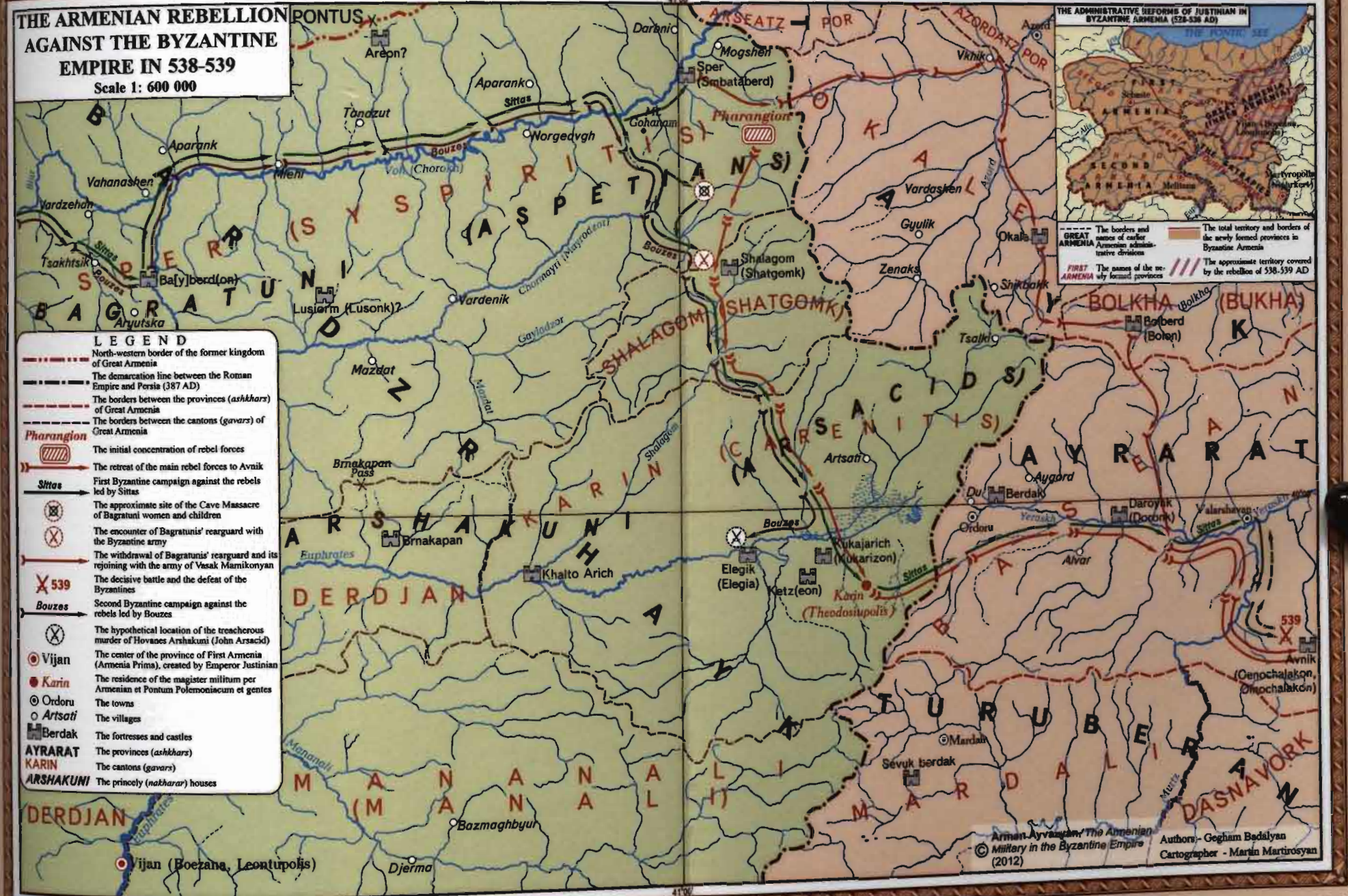
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Map 1. The Armenian Rebellion against the Byzantine Empire in 538-539